

P.R.O.P.H.E.T Ghost in the machine

Introducing the new science fiction fantasy Series

CLONES OF MAKRAS

BOOK ONE

p.r.o.p.h.e.t

Ghost in the machine

Markus Heinrich Rehbach

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Chapter One: Rise and shine? Some days it's hard enough just to *rise*.

O.P suddenly found himself awake. He would have preferred to go on sleeping. But grudgingly he accepted the inevitability of having to get up and out of bed. And this he finally did inch by inch, as if hoping that by delaying things he might gain enough time to think of some clever way out of it. But to his great disappointment, but not surprise, no such ideas came.

'Time to get up', he heard his Uncle call from downstairs. He could smell the fresh coffee and toast. 'Mmmm. Toast', he thought to himself, and the prospect of some deliciously warm toast gave him just enough motivation to drag his lifeless, resenting body down the stairs and into the kitchen.

'Morning O.P', his Uncle would say, as usual. And as usual O.P would give a noncommittal groan, the teenage equivalent of a 'reply'. Secretly, of course, he appreciated his Uncle's way of reminding him that, at home at least, he was welcome, accepted, and approved of.

School? Now that was another thing entirely. He loathed school. He detested school. Often he even feared school. The kids ran riot in his school. Almost without any adult supervision, let alone actual hands-on discipline. O.P couldn't even remember who his actual teachers were supposed to be. Each day seemed to bring some new, young, completely 'out of their depth' casual teacher with those strange accents. Kiwi, South-African, Australian. They arrived with trepidation and left on the verge of a nervous breakdown. The tough ones that is.

The ones with weaker nervous systems often lost it completely. It was rare to see the same teacher twice in the same week. They usually needed a few days just to get over the experience. And they only ever returned if they were really desperate for work. In this case they would enter classrooms quietly, hand out photocopies of work they never really expected anyone to take seriously, let alone finish, and sat down at the desk, hoping to get through the lesson without anyone jumping out of a window or throwing a chair at them.

These casual relief teachers composed themselves to face the day one lesson at a time. 'Just survive this lesson' was their mantra. They did not dare extend their hope further than that. Just to survive from lesson to lesson, and then day to day, that was all they could hope for. 'Just don't let them break you'. They kept in mind all the teachers they had seen screaming at kids, shaking them, venting their own hopelessness in sarcastic humor. At the time they were too immersed in their own misery to realise what damage they might be doing, one 'remark' at a time. One 'gesture' at a time. Damage to the psyche of kids already pushed past the limits of what kids 'should' have to experience.

The casual teachers were under attack. Overwhelmed with the need to survive the one lesson. They did not have the luxury of thinking further than that. 'Keep the kids from killing each other, and them' was about the height of their ambitions. Even that was pretty ambitious, based on what O.P had himself witnessed. Any casual teacher who attempted to actually teach, and try to salvage what infinitesimal spark of self-esteem, what 'ghost' of a dreamer, might still lurk in the dark depths of that day's student's souls, well they tended to be mocked by the permanent staff, rather than supported by them. They might be 'admired' by the school's support staff, but they were powerless to protect themselves, let alone the casual teacher.

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The problems just ran too deep. Home problems. Family problems. Life problems. Student's came with so much emotional baggage and so many distractions that whatever dreams they had of learning were crushed and smothered. Any kid that tried to learn was attacked by their peers. The casual teachers might feel they were under attack. But they got to go home each afternoon. And they were free to leave and seek their fortunes elsewhere. The students, on the other hand, faced this war from the perspective of conscripts. From K to 10.

The 'kids' soon developed all the physical and mental aberrations of veterans of the trenches. Their energies were tightly gathered and focused upon mere survival. There was little left over to caring about 'learning'. Anyway, the lesson that had long been driven home to them was that they were not 'worth' anyone's approval, acceptance, or even attention. They were human garbage. They were to be 'babysit' from 9 to 3, from K to 10. Their presence merely tolerated, rather than welcome. Their 'troubles' just too great a burden for an already overtaxed educational system. Their 'problems' just too much for an overwhelmed, and mostly disinterested, mechanical social system. That pretty much said everything. They were defined by the system, by society, as mere problems and trouble.

O.P remembered the time the Principle came into his class while a young casual relief teacher was trying to get the students down from the window ledges. The classroom was two floors up. The windows were open. The teacher was, at first, horrified to see the Principle. But his fear of being yelled at and sent packing, which was written clearly across his face in capital letters, soon turned to complete astonishment. For the Principle smiled, apparently oblivious to all the chaos around them, acted as if everything appeared to be under control, and simply continued on their way. You could see the teacher's jaw drop, and a glaze of disbelief replace his astonishment. And just a hint of relief. It seemed that the casual teacher really needed this work, abhorrent as it was.

O.P had watched as the teacher had just sat down, completely dumbfounded. 'Drowning'. Completely in over their head. Totally out of their depth. But lurking below the teacher's astonishment, O.P could also tell that to the casual teacher, this was just business as usual for this sort of school.

O.P felt sorry for the teacher. But he also felt very vulnerable for himself. There was not even a pretense of discipline at his school. It was as if all the teachers had given up and were just doing their best to get through each day, like marking off the days on their prison wall, looking forward with all their remaining hope to the day they might be released. That was the only ambition that remained to them, after every other had been rudely ripped from their grasps. Their original dreams of 'making a difference' were now well beyond any realistic hope of realisation. Well beyond their reach. They were just teachers after all. Not super heroes. They had no secret powers. They were never going to be able to reach out to their students and pull them up, out of the darkness of their lives.

They had no more illusions of 'educating'. No more dreams of being 'the wind beneath the wings' of the kids whose care they had been entrusted with by an indifferent, uncaring society. It seemed the only hope for them was a transfer out to a better school district. O.P often heard them talking about how long it would be till they had enough 'points' to leave the school, and move to a 'nice' one. At least a 'safe' one. One where they could park their car without having to worry about it all day. Worry about the paintwork. Worry about the tyres.

Recently a teacher had been involved in a terrible accident after some kids had let down one of the front tyres. She had braked while cornering, to avoid, ironically, a child that had just heedlessly leaped into the road, and the tyre had been ripped off the rim.

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Sparks had leapt from the naked rim as it dug into the asphalt and the car careered across the opposite lane, into an oncoming truck. The Principal had warned the whole school at a special assembly how lucky she had been to survive the impact. However O.P. was not shocked when many of the students made stupid jokes and sniggered amongst themselves. O.P. was also not surprised that the principal just ignored these inappropriate reactions to the terrible news. What was she going to do? Scream? Yell? Shake the students by the shoulders trying to wake up the remaining dredges of 'human spirit' that must still lurk somewhere in their almost empty husks?

O.P. often thought back on that day last year when a young Australian teacher had made such a big impression on everyone. He had more or less stunned the kids by treating them, well, as if they were 'normal' kids. It was as if he just did not know that they were not normal. It confused the students no end. They just did not know how to respond to him. Was he taking the piss? Was he genuine? It was almost surreal for them. They felt completely disorientated. Like Alice down the rabbit hole, finding herself in a world that did not correspond to what they had learned was 'reality'. They were almost dumbfounded into submission. Many of them actually found it quite an enjoyable experience. It was as if he actually respected them enough to expect their best from them. Few had ever experienced those sorts of positive expectations. Even the rowdiest of kids was sort of caught off guard, off balance, not sure of themselves. And so they all went along with him. Some for the novelty. Some as a sort of 'lark'. But after much patience he had managed to get them into orderly lines, and then quietly into the classroom. It continued in the same vein from then on in.

At the end of the day, after all the kids had gone home in a positive sort of state of 'not being able to quite make sense of what they had just experienced as a day at school', O.P., hanging back, had witnessed something even stranger. Most of the school support staff, the cooks, cleaners, the caretaker, and what seemed to be the complete ranks of the office staff, were all standing on the front steps at the entrance of the school waiting for the teacher. At first he appeared to think he was in some sort of trouble. As if he was used to that sort of trouble. Ultimately he was almost as confounded as his students had been with him that day, when this waiting group of men and women smiled and shook his hands, thanking him again and again for what he had done with the kids that day.

What O.P. could never quite work out was why they never saw that teacher again at his school. Ever. He was just like some sort of 'urban legend' spoken of from time to time among the support staff, the office staff, and some of the students. Strangely enough the other teachers, if they ever mentioned him at all, did so almost as if they had resented him. It was as if they were jealous of him. O.P. remembered having overheard some of them 'bitching' about him in the staffroom while he was on playground duty that day.

If the students were going to be honest, even the worst of them, well, from that day onward, they had begun looking upon each new casual relief teacher with a sort of hesitant hope that they too might prove as surprising as that young man had been. But it was all in vain. There was not a spark of that magic among the lot of them. Just the same helpless, lost, hopeless souls wandering in like shades from some teacher limbo, perhaps paying for past sins by being forced to endure this 'purgatory'.

That was the sort of day O.P. had to 'look forward to'. A day in 'purgatory'. His own little version of hell. Surely he must have done something bad in a past life to deserve this horrible fate. What it was he couldn't recall. But if so, then it must have been really bad. Or was god simply that malicious? Of course O.P., like most of his peers, did not believe in god as such. He just heard adults talking about this god as if they believed in him. Only they never seemed to behave any the better for their supposed 'belief' in this god, at least as far as O.P. could make out.

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It would be understatement to say that O.P was in no hurry to arrive at school. And he had no intention of leaving himself prey to all the bullies on the school bus either. No. He preferred to walk. He preferred to keep to himself mostly. And so that morning found him walking along through the suburban streets, down the main road and up the hill, where an old water tower 'guarded' the valley. O.P let his imagination wander, transforming the tower into a castle keep, and himself into an errant knight. A magnificent knight, returning from some far-flung field of honor to his sweet, dear PRI, who had waited patiently for years for him to return, covered in glory, from ferocious battles where he had fought valiantly and proven his courage and strength.

But just then his mood sunk into the ground, and he would have liked to have followed it. Deep enough so that no-one could see him, or bother him. The ardent hope that they hadn't seen him flared up in him. But like a flare launching into a rainstorm, its bright light of optimism was immediately smothered by the grim, unwelcome, sickening truth.

One of Renshaw's antagonisers noticed him. He in turn made sure his malicious mates soon heard the 'good news' too. O.P knew that they would never fail to seize their chance. To seize this welcome opportunity of hounding, harassing, and bullying some lone, and therefore vulnerable, potential victim.

To O.P it was as if they were born, and then had spent every waking moment of their lives, in thinking up ways to make his life miserable. However to them he was just another victim. Just another way to distract themselves from their own miseries. There was nothing at all personal in it. O.P was not of any particular interest to them at all, as an individual. He was just a type. An opportunity. A way to vent their own self-loathing and simmering hate for the world that neglected and abused them. They were only emptying out what the world had filled them with. They were just finding another 'vessel' to carry the misery of the world. Why should it stop with them, when they could pass it on to someone even less fortunate? Someone weaker, and less able to protect themselves than they were?

Renshaw was the worst of them. Bigger than anyone in his year. It was rumored he had been 'kept back' a year. And he really seemed to resent it. Worse, he seemed to enjoy unloading all that resentment onto the socially weaker kids. The kids with few friends. The sensitive kids. The ones not cut out for this school. Not hard enough. Not mean enough. Not vindictive, spiteful, and malicious enough. Just not ruthless and vicious enough.

O.P's good natured good will made him the natural target of bullies. Worse, he was no good at sport, but good at school work. And then there was his supermarket clothing. He had none of the things that gave other kids their social status. He was vulnerable to all sorts of bullying and victimisation. And the teachers did nothing to protect him. In fact they unwittingly made things worse for him every time they praised him for his outstanding work, his helpfulness, his consideration, his conscientiousness. Implying to other kids that they should be more like O.P was a recipe for O.P's doom. It made him wince. It made him very cautious about doing anything that might draw his teacher's positive attentions. He never went so far as to behave badly, but he was very reserved and cautious about not standing out. Not raising his head higher and making himself a 'tall poppy'. Not making himself a 'target'.

Renshaw walked up to O.P as O.P cowered and looked for an escape route. 'So what do we have here', he called out, for the benefit of his 'mates', turning his head around to face them as he spoke, but keeping his large, heavy, domineering body facing O.P.

O.P, seeing that Renshaw's gaze was fixed upon his 'mates' at that moment, seeking their approval and even praise, seized the opportunity to try to make a getaway. But he was not fast enough. Just as he turned he felt a vice-like grip on his shoulder. His pack

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was being pulled away from him. Then he felt a powerful jolt push him to the ground. As he sprawled in the dirt, Renshaw went through his back-pack, chucking books onto the ground, until he found his wallet and lunch. 'Ah, as usual, nothing worth taking here. He opened the wallet and shook it, showing his 'mates', who jumped at the chance to make fun of someone else, to have the groups aggressive energies directed at someone who was not themselves.

They all joined in mocking O.P and his poverty. After they had 'milked' this joke for all its malicious value, and Renshaw had gained about as much approval from his 'mates' as he was likely to get, Renshaw threw down the pack and wandered back to his 'mates'. His no longer had any interest in O.P. He had gotten all he was going to get from that encounter. O.P no longer meant anything at all to Renshaw.

And so, sprawled in the dirt, O.P was left alone again. He waited, not making a move. Not wanting to encourage any further attacks from his victimisers. He waited until they had turned the corner of the road, and he was pretty sure they had lost interest in 'toying' with him. They reminded him of an ill-natured cat playing with some powerless creature it had stumbled upon. It had no interest in eating it. But it gave the cat some distraction from its own misery. The cat had found something it had power over. It was too good an opportunity to simply let go. And yet the cat gained nothing by terrorising the poor mouse.

O.P sat up. He waited a moment before collecting his things together. He enjoyed the peace and tranquility of the roadside trees. He felt an affinity with them. He would have liked to just remain there, like a tree, and enjoy the peaceful green serenity with them. But for some unfathomable reason O.P got up and left his 'friends' to their vegetable bliss. O.P could never get over his natural conscientiousness. He could never overcome the feeling that he 'should' do 'the right thing'. As if something was expected of him. But who expected anything of O/P? Certainly not his teachers. Of course there was his Uncle. But he was just an old fart. A retired electrical engineer or something. And he had only taken on the role of 'caretaker' for O.P because after his parents had died, no-one else had wanted to. Was it really wanted to? OR merely willing to? Whatever the case, O.P dusted himself off, collected his books and dusted them off, and faced his responsibilities and obligations with grim determination.

Having had his journey delayed, and then having decided it wise to take a different route to the one Renshaw and his 'mates' had taken, just to be on the safe side, he arrived just as the bell had stopped ringing. A long stain of dirt ran along his shirt and up his face, into his hair. The consoling thought that he'd had worse occurred to marginally brighten O.P's thoughts. But it then darkened them again. Plenty of times. Much worse. This was just an averagely miserable day for O.P. Just one link in a long chain of misery that he could only ever dream of escaping. Life was not good if you were unpopular, poor, bad at sport, and virtually friendless.

Lucky for O.P he did have some friends. But they went to the private school in the next suburb. And so he had to endure the hell that was his public school alone.

Endure. That was the best you could do in this situation. There was no way out. There was not going to be any redemption. The public school system was there for those unlucky enough not to be able to afford a decent, private education. The government had given up long ago on anything like standards or expectations. Nobody wanted to know about the problems that existed. And so of course they were never addressed, let alone resolved. Nope. Kids like O.P were just left to fend for themselves among the almost 'feral' kids of the local unemployed, marginally employed, and pensioner families.

O.P's Uncle Roy was a pensioner too. O.P assumed he was more or less retired, though he occasionally appeared to have some sort of work in electronics, as far as O.P could

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make out. They lived in a council 'semi'. O.P wore shoes from the supermarket. He'd never worn a brand-name shoe like Nike or Adidas. His clothes were mostly second hand stuff from the goodwill shops. His Uncle cut O.Ps hair himself. Needless to say he was not a trained hair-dresser. Needless to say that the 'style' O.P sported was less than 'flattering'.

Electronics. O.P reflected how Uncle Roy always seemed to be busy in his ramshackle 'workshop'. It wasn't clear at all what he did in there. Whatever it was, it seemed to occupy a lot of Uncle Roy's time. At least it kept him out of O.P's hair. Anyway, there were lots of things in O.P's life that didn't seem to be completely clear. So he rarely focused his curiosity on any one of them in particular.

For example, his parents had died when he was very young. He didn't remember them, to be honest. When shown photographs, he would be able to identify them as his dad and mum, but only because his Uncle had so often pointed at the old photos and told him that the shy yet beautiful young woman was his mother, and the handsome, but slightly unsure of himself young man was his father. Or at least had been, until the accident. But Uncle Roy had never said what sort of 'accident' and O.P had never had the heart to ask. O.P sort of wanted the question to remain unasked. And thus unanswered. It sort of left something open and still alive about his parents. Some mystery that meant the story was not yet written, and finished. As if the story might have some other ending. A happy ending.

When it came to his parents, however, he had no real recollections at all. He wondered if that was normal. But then it had become normal for him. It had become normal for him to live with his Uncle in their social housing semi-detached brick two-story town-house. It had become normal to dread going to school. It had become normal to shop at good-will shops and wear super-market sneakers. It had become normal to have the worst hair-cut in school, to be terrible at sports, to have no friends at school, to be bullied, teased, and basically left out of most school activities by his class-mates.

Too many bad things had become normal. And then there was that really terrible thing that happened.

Chapter Two: Tim

It was Saturday morning. No school today. And so O.P was actually *keen* to get up and out of bed. He gave a stretch and a yawn. A sudden burst of birdsong just outside his window swirled into a thrilling crescendo, then almost immediately faded off into the distance. A swirling chittering-chattering of smaller birds raced up and over the rooftops. He imagined joining them. From up where they careened and darted, up above the worries and cares of the world, the rows of town houses, all virtually identical to O.P's, would seem to ebb and flow down the road on some sort of asphalt and concrete tide.

He got out of bed, had another stretch, and a wide yawn that left his eyes watering. In a gloriously delicious half-sleep he stumbled down the stairs to the kitchen to make some breakfast. He was glad to discover that he was first up. This meant he could put the kettle on to make coffee for his Uncle. He enjoyed being able to do things for his Uncle. He'd never taken his Uncle for granted, like most kids took their parents for granted. Then again, most kids had never lost two parents. You were not likely to take anyone for granted after *that*.

Just like that people disappeared. One moment you might be arguing with them about some trifle, and the next they were dead. You would never get to see them again. Never get to tell them how important they were to you. So O.P was quick to let go of grudges

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or complaints. There was not much he could do for his Uncle. He was the kid, after all, and his Uncle was the adult of the house. But still, any chance O.P got, he let his Uncle know that he was glad he was there. It was the truth. O.P couldn't bear the thought of being left alone again.

Through wet, blurred, still half-asleep eyes, he looked to the clock to check the time. It was still quite early. He heard muffled noises from his Uncle's room. *'Either his Uncle was getting up or dying'*, O.P joked to himself. Apparently waking up became a much bigger deal the older you got, O.P mused. So O.P got busy preparing some coffee and toast for his Uncle. He enjoyed being the one taking care of his Uncle for a change. His Uncle said he was 'full of good will'.

The truth was that O.P just felt good about helping others. It gave him a real sense of satisfaction, to think he had made a positive difference in someone's day really buoyed him up. It gave him a sense of self-worth. It was not about the size of the contribution he could make that mattered. It was about the intention. He knew there was little he could really do in this world that would make any real difference. After all, what did he, O.P, really have to offer? Life was so big and so full of troubles. And O.P was just a kid. And not even a 'regular' kid at that. Not like all the kids he saw out spending money in shops, buying flash clothes and cool sneakers, and going 'out' to the movies and cafés. Kids with parents. Some even had *two* parents. Kids that went to private schools, or at least good state schools. Kids that would grow up to be someone. Go to university. Get good jobs. Make a difference in the world.

His Uncle stumbled into the kitchen, more zombie than man. O.P knew to leave his Uncle to himself until his second cup of coffee. Long ago he had made the mistake of trying to relate to his Uncle as a human being before this second cup. It had taken O.P days to recover the courage to dare approach his Uncle in the morning again.. He had taken it too personally. That was typical of O.P. He tended to take things personally. Things he had no responsibility for.

But then Uncle Roy had explained to him that it had nothing to do with O.P, or anything he had said or done. It was just the way he was. He was not a *'morning person'*, was how his Uncle had phrased it. He actually apologised, but then asked O.P to 'understand', and to just leave him be in the mornings, until he, Uncle Roy, sort of gave the 'all clear', basically by approaching O.P himself. So O.P would not tempt fate again, and waited until after his Uncle had at least begun his second cup before venturing to speak to him.

! O.P looked out the window and was greeted by a glorious golden day. It was the middle of autumn. Everything glowed with a bright, moist, golden wet sheen. The bark on the trees. The soil where the grass had worn away in patches. Even the asphalt was a lustrous moist black. 'A perfect day', O.P smiled to himself. Without thinking he quickly went upstairs, threw some clothing on, and raced out, calling out, 'I'm just off to Tim's', as he pulled the front door closed, taking care not to slam it.

First his Uncle considered how conscientious it was of him not to slam the door. 'Typical O.P', he reflected. But then suddenly he remembered something. Something terrible. His face was etched with the terrible memory. He suddenly got to his feet to follow O.P, to try to stop him. But then thought better of it. O.P was long gone by now. 'Tim', he said aloud, shaking his head sadly. 'Poor O.P'.

O.P ran up the road, taking the fast and 'wide', almost finding himself in the front yards of the semi-detached council flats that crowded in close to the footpath, like onlookers in a street parade. In his joyful enthusiasm he felt as free as those birds that had woken him that morning. His feet ran automatically, along a route he had taken so many times he could have done it blindfolded. And so he reached the gate of Number 35 and was carried by the momentum of his flight up the path and to the front door. He rang the

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door-bell full of positive expectation and eager readiness. Tim's mother answered the door. She looked at O.P with a face full of confusion and great sadness. O.P felt a wave of empathy radiate from her and engulf him. Her sad eyes held his a moment, full of questions. But what were they asking?

Just then a shock suddenly hit O.P. He was visibly shaken. He looked as if a ton of wet sand had just fallen down on him, crushing him. Smothering him. He could not breathe. It was as if his memory had just caught up with him after his race down the road. He had been still half-asleep. But now he was suddenly fully awake. Complete sober. Tim's mother could not help but realise what had happened. O.P had gotten up this morning as he had on countless other Saturday mornings, and come straight over to her place to plan his weekend together with her son, Tim. Only there was no Tim waiting for O.P today. There wouldn't ever be any Tim waiting for O.P, or anyone else, ever again. There would be no more weekends with Tim. Not ever. It was too final to grasp. Tim had died the month before.

O.P hang his head in sadness, and turned like a sleep-walker, dragging his feet back down the path. But then he felt Tim's mother's hand on his shoulder, and heard her gentle voice. 'O.P? Would you like to come in for a moment? There are some things of Tim's that he would have wanted you to have'. He felt himself turn and walk back into Number 35 with Tim's mum. He was distraught beyond words. It was as if he had just only then received the impossibly incomprehensible news of Tim's death. And so he followed Tim's mum up to Tim's room. The room felt so familiar. Surely any moment now Tim would jump out of the closet, or emerge from under the bed, or come in from the hallway, laughing, with some joke or idea to share with O.P.

The room was pretty much as it had always been. Only there were a few boxes on the bed. Tim's mum moved them to make place for herself and O.P to sit down on the bed. She had her arm around him, comforting him. There were tears in her eyes as she looked down to him. 'I know Tim would have wanted you to have these things.' She gestured to the box. O.P put his hands in the box and touched some of the things, like an elephant caressing the bones of a dead relative with its trunk. He somehow felt a connection with Tim in doing so.

O.P looked up into the warm, loving face of Tim's mum and, seeing her pain, and not wanting it to be there, thanked her, and let her give him a big hug. He took the box, as his eyes took in the room around him, so familiar and yet so utterly and irreversibly changed. His mind could not grasp it. The facts just slipped out of O.P's grasp each time it tried to hold them in his consciousness.

Psychologists would call it a sort of denial. His mind just did not want it to be true. It couldn't be true. Tim was dead. How could that be? It just wasn't possible. Tim dead! How? No. Yes. It was true, but that truth had absolutely no weight of, well, truth, to it. Old people died. After a long illness. Or maybe in a war young men might die, or a bomb might drop on your house and kill your entire family.

But there had been no war. No bomb. Tim had just died. As if fate had slipped a cog, left a gap in the scheme of things, and Tim had just slipped through it. He was 13. He was blazing with life like a new sun. It was impossible to think of that bright flame suddenly going out. How could it? Where could all that life that was contained in Tim have gone? It would have taken a planet sized hole to take it all. And yet, there it was. He was gone. That much O.P's brain could grasp. But dead? Forever dead? No. O.P's brain just would not, could not, even begin to accept that. Let alone to deal with it? How could you deal with something of that magnitude? How? What did you do? How did you respond?

O.P could just not manage to somehow assimilate that utterly unconvincing fact. It just did not fit with anything else that did make sense. No matter how O.P tried to re-sort all the pieces of his life, that fact just would not fit, anywhere. He could only mentally

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mouth the idea. Tim dead? How? No. But yes. Tim dead. It meant nothing and everything. Too much and then nothing.

'Thanks Mrs. Ridley'. O.P could not stay any longer in that room. It was just too much. He expected Tim to arrive any moment, even though he knew, as a fact, that Tim was not going to arrive in a moment. He was never going to arrive. He would never see him again. And he had no way of processing that information. It did not solve any of the riddle. It did not answer the question. It did not add any sense to any of this.

And so O.P got up, cradling the box in his arms, and went out of Tim's room. He lingered a moment on the top of the stairs, feeling the familiar smoothness of the wooden bannister. Then he slowly felt his way down the stairs, one stair at a time. In a few moments he found himself outside in the golden sunshine. He dragged his feet down towards the park without thinking. After a few minutes he found himself sitting under the huge old tree where he and Tim would often sit and just enjoy each other's company, joking, laughing, and dreaming. He could barely bring himself to touch Tim's prize possessions. The silver scale model Mercedes gull-wing convertible. So beautiful. A treasure. And the New York cap some relation had sent him from America. O.P put the hat on. He felt full of a sorrow that must surely eat away his very heart.

Just then he heard a pretty female voice softly caressing his ear. It took a moment for his mind to register the voice, like a drop of water falling down to the bottom of a deep well, and then echoing back to the light. Only then did O.P's mind manage to put a face to the voice. It was PRI.

O.P felt his sorrow fall away like a wave falling back into the ocean after its crashing drive up the sand. In the time it might have taken to re-launch its assault on the beach, PRI managed to build a weir, damming it up, breaking its momentum just long enough for her to replace its dull dark weight with her own cheerful, life-giving, joyful, blossoming lightness.

PRI was life. O.P wondered if he would ever be able to explain to PRI what she meant to him. He wanted to touch her. To fuse with her. To become one with her. One big bundle of electricity. He felt a longing to become part of her somehow. He could barely restrain the impulse to kiss her. He had come so close so many times. Today however there was something deeper in his need to be with her. It was like she had known he had needed her, and she had come. It felt like some kind of magic. He just felt so glad that she was there. And he wanted somehow to let her know what it meant to him. He looked at her and was about to say something lame when she gave him a look that said 'yes, I'm here, don't worry, and don't you dare make a big fuss about it', so that he didn't say anything. He just sat quietly next to her. So close to her. He just looked into her eyes and felt his face breaking out into a big smile. And just then, as if only with her there could he feel strong enough to do it, he felt some hot tears roll down his cheeks. He wiped them off and smiled at her, not at all embarrassed. She didn't speak either. Everything that needed saying was expressed in their communion of silence.

All this time Uncle Roy was home worrying about poor O.P. But what was there to do? It was just a terrible fact. Life is like that. Life is dangerous. We take it for granted when we have it. And then all at once it is gone. And where does it go? Where did it come from? Who could possibly have an answer that could soothe the heavy, aching, sorrow filled heart of a 13 year old boy who has just lost his best friend to that incomprehensible fact called death?

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Chapter Three: Death and Growth

All of O.P's predecessors had had to face the fact of death at the age of 13. How they dealt with it at the time, well, Uncle Roy could only guess. But the most important psycho-historians had all more or less agreed that the experience had been a significant one in the development of the qualities that had made each successive emperor such a unique success. It might be necessary. But still, it was a lot to put upon a young boy. He wasn't sure that, given the choice himself, he would have put the boy through it. But at the same time he was fascinated to see how his 'charge' would respond.

The main thing, anyway, Uncle Roy thought to himself, is to be there for him. To offer what emotional support he could. His role was not to influence the boy in any way, but merely to provide as close a simulation of the life conditions of Makrus the Optimiser as was possible. He only hoped that one day the lad would understand that he was, after all, only following orders, and doing what the psycho-historical experts all thought was in the best interests of the galaxy.

But what of O.P's interests? No, if he is anything like his predecessors, his Uncle reflected, and from what his Uncle had seen so far, he certainly was, well if he was, as he appeared to be, then he would be the first to agree that it was necessary. And one day he would be ordering the same sort of 'care' for his potential successors. And while there were rumors that in the past some of the Makrus clone's carers had been a little too literal, shall we say, at least in this case there was no actual dying done, just the affect of death. But wait, all this will make sense later. For now, just consider that Uncle Roy, like many people, was not only what he appeared to be. And O.P? Well, patience, my dear friend, and all will be revealed.

Chapter four: A new awakening

Uncle Roy had been considering the next step in O.P's 'career' for some time now. Some psycho-historians believed that in past generations, some Makras clones had come into their full powers too early. But there could be no certainty as to the original experiences of Makrus the Optimiser. Some claimed he must have necessarily developed his full physical capabilities at an early age, even younger than O.P, simply to have survived his childhood. However others claimed that it was in fact his 'late blooming' that played the critical, most decisive role in his final success.

For during his early years he had suffered much. He had experienced many disadvantages and setback. He had learned what life was like for the poor, the disadvantaged, and the unfortunate. His earlier experiences had humbled him. He had never developed the typical sense of entitlement that other people with the same talents, good looks, and intelligence tended to have.

His earlier life of chronic neglect and occasional abuse had given him an authentic craving for justice. It had led to his later development of empathy for the suffering of all sentient beings. It had made him the compassionate and caring person that history remembers him as. It had given him the drive and ambition necessary to overcome all the obstacles he faced in his later life. It filled him with a burning will to protect the rights of others. To eliminate all forms of violence. To guarantee justice for everyone and everything.

Uncle Roy, O.P's 'carer', was agonising over this decision when O.P came into the room, dejected, downcast, and despairing. His head hang low, his shoulders bent inwards, his back bowed forward. He looked too miserable for words. And so Uncle Roy put his hand

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on the boy's shoulders and tried to console him as best he could. 'What's up lad? Those bullies been at it again? What have they done this time?'

Without looking up O.P muttered 'They took Tim's hat. I was wearing it in the park, and Renshaw just walked past, grabbed the hat off my head before I knew what was happening, and kept walking. He put Tim's hat on his own filthy head. But Renshaw was with his friends. Before I could even think of something to say, let alone do, not that I could have done anything, they'd gone off together. I just can't stand it. That was Tim's favorite hat. His mum gave it to me'.

Uncle Roy knew about the hat. It had been arranged that O.P should have some of Tim's things. He knew what it must mean to the lad. The incident brought things to a head. It would be the perfect test of O.P's character. His nature. Would it break under the conditions? Well surely that was what he had to find out. That was the whole point of this whole exercise, wasn't it? But he found himself loathe to test the boys mettle. What if he failed the test? What if...? Well, there were too many what ifs, weren't there? And better to find out now, when the stakes were so low, then later, when the fates of billions might be in the balance!

And so it came about that Uncle Roy stopped 'spiking' O.P's orange and carrot juice, his Milo, his cocoa, his soy-shakes, his cola, with that highly specific cocktail of chemicals that Uncle Roy had been giving O.P since he was about 6. It would be a matter of a day or two before they would wear off. Uncle Roy was both happy for the boy, who had till now been 'suppressed' by this chemical cocktail, and extremely nervous as to how he would respond to the return of his natural abilities. There was always the chance that he might abuse them, to wreak a revenge on the world that had been so mean and brutal towards him. Makrus had never been known to abuse his strengths, nor to seek revenge. It was a key personality trait. One that the psycho-historians believed enabled him to accomplish many of his key triumphs.

Makras had not come into his full potential until much later than he might have under more favorable circumstances. Uncle Roy's job was to see to it that O.P's child-hood mirrored the child-hood experiences and conditions of Makras as closely as possible.

Uncle Roy was not going to let O.P out of his sight over the next day or two. No. Most of all he worried about the necessary confrontation between O.P and that Bully. 'That big sod would not know what hit him, if in deed O.P went in that direction', Uncle Roy thought to himself. 'But what would a normal 13 year old boy do given the chance to humiliate and avenge years of torment, bullying, and misery? Then, that was the point, wasn't it? O.P could not afford to be 'typical'. He had to be exceptional. As exceptional as Makrus the Optimiser had been in his youth'.

'Me O.P's body guard? Well', he thought to himself, chuckling 'O.P won't be needing a body guard much now. His arch enemy though, now that's another question altogether. I wonder if the big fool has any idea what is heading his way!'

The next school day O.P waited and waited, hoping to catch Renshaw alone. With all his 'mates' around, he was at a real psychological disadvantage. It was bad enough that he was so big. But with all the 'moral' support of his 'gang' Renshaw was, psychologically, invincible. In this context, anyone hoping to confront him felt reflexively powerless and vulnerable.

No, O.P considered, if he was going to have any chance of reasoning with Renshaw, he'd have to catch him alone. And so he bade his time. Of course all this time his stomach was speaking aloud of its fear. He had already made several trips to the toilets. His nerves were at breaking point. He was a nervous wreck. 'Almost as bad as some of those casual replacement teachers they sent to the school', he joked to himself.

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He didn't feel at all brave. But he was committed. He had decided that it just was not done to let Renshaw parade around in Tim's favorite hat. He just had to get it back. If it meant taking a savage beating at the hands of Renshaw, then that was simply how it was going to have to be. There was no way around it. O.P had set his mind upon the thing. It was the right thing. He had to do it for Tim. Just had to. It was the only way he could express his loyalty to his friend. It had taken on all the character of some religious crusade, some holy quest, some act of good faith. But he felt sure that he had a better chance of keeping up his courage and determination if only he could face his dragon, his demon, his enemy, one on one.

And so it came to pass that Renshaw's constant 'escort' were called into the Deputy's office, leaving Renshaw alone. 'Funny', O.P thought to himself, 'Suddenly he looks so harmless'. O.P even felt something bordering on sympathy for Renshaw. But that passed as soon as his eye caught the now glaring, murderous gaze that Renshaw darted at him like poisoned daggers. Renshaw took the hat off and began stroking it like a pet, throwing O.P a cajoling looks, as if to say 'What are you going to do about it? .

'The time had come! No backing down now', O.P thought to himself, at once strangely elated and yet fearful. With this resolve O.P walked towards Renshaw, whose cocky smile indicated he was not averse to 'a little fun' with O.P.

'I want the hat back. It's not yours. It belongs to a friend of mine', O.P called out in challenge.

'A friend hey? You don't got no friends. Loser! Oh, no, wait about. Now I had seen you around with that girlfriend of yours. What's his name? Oh, but he's dead, aint it so?', Renshaw retorted.

O.P felt a swell of rage build up inside him. He was alone with his biggest enemy. The source of so much misery. 'Why, he'd like to...' he glowered to himself, but he checked his emotion, calmly and deliberately repeating his demand. 'Give back the hat Renshaw. It's not yours. Give it back', O.P heard himself saying, this time a little louder and more assertively than he had intended.

Just then Renshaw's 'mates' came out of the office. They looked to Renshaw, then to O.P. They reveled in the delicious anticipation of a 'fight'. This was going to be a bit of 'fun', for sure. They were almost salivating in advance of the blood that was to be spilled for their amusement and malicious gratification. Oh how tasty! Someone else's humiliation!

All this time Uncle Roy was observing from a monitor in his 'work-room'. He had found a satellite in the correct position in its flight path around the earth and then had 'hacked' into its program. He had quickly 'co-opted' the satellite to keep his eye on O.P. It was his third satellite today. He would have preferred a geo-stationary satellite, so he wouldn't have to keep switching between satellites, but there were none in the right location. He had been keeping an eye on O.P since he left the house that morning. He reflected that the technology was of a quite rudimentary standard, but it served his purposes, with a little 'tweaking' here and there with his own software.

And so Uncle Roy watched anxiously to see the final outcome, swaying back and forth between confidence and worry. Would O.P behave opportunistically, taking advantage of his new abilities to pay back Renshaw for all those years, or would he control his quite valid, justifiable rage, and sacrifice the satisfaction of his darker impulses to a higher, nobler good-will? He set his recording devices to 'record', for surely this was exactly the sort of interaction that the Emperor's advisers and evaluation panels would need to base their decisions on. For better or worse. It was his duty. No affections for the boy, which indeed had grown up and become much more powerful than he had imagined they could, would be allowed to prevent a thorough evaluation of the lad.

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Either O.P would prove himself master of himself, and worthy of leadership, of being master of the galaxy, or show some as yet unrevealed flaw in his basic character. Had he 'bred true'? Already two of the clones had shown themselves examples of how embryology can thwart the best intentions of the most skilled geneticists. Two clones had already been rejected from the process. They had been eliminated from the program. And both were little older than O.P. The standards were high. The bar was set higher than for any other public office. For the emperor ruled by decree. He had absolute power. He had to be absolutely principled, self-controlled, and ruled by an innate sense of goodwill, driven by the highest, most noblest of natures, and acting in perfect good faith.

As Uncle Roy was adjusting some settings, and about to 'hack' into the next succession of satellites as they passed into and out of O.P's G.P.S co-ordinates, he caught some sudden movement out of the corner of his eye. And so he was drawn to bear witness to the following, which would go down in playground history.

More than that though. It would contribute towards nothing less than the history of the entire galaxy.

Had they managed to replicate the nature and nurture, the genes, and the conditions necessary to the emergence of the particular learned traits and innate qualities that had made Makrus the Optimiser, and all his 52 successors, the great galactic emperors they had proven to be?

O.P was as nervous as hell. No reason to kid himself. He was really scared. Sure his Uncle had tried to teach him a lot of self-defense moves, and he had assured him that 'when the time came, it would all come to O.P as naturally as breathing'. Those were his Uncle's words. But so far every time he had tried to fight back he'd just ended up on the ground, bruised, bloodied, and wondering about his Uncle's ideas of 'the time'. Exactly when would 'the time' come? He was happy to spend time with his Uncle, having him teach him all those moves, but it seemed that they would never come 'natural' to O.P. He just didn't have the co-ordination, balance, or poise. He just wasn't Steven Seagal or Rutger Hauer.

Uncle Roy was doing some quick calculations. Surely the drugs which produced O.P's artificially induced lack of eye-hand co-ordination, depth perception, balance, and reaction-times should have been cleared out of his system by now? He had pumped O.P full of 'de-toxing' fruit juices, vitamins, and blood-cleaners. He looked closely for some sign. The satellite images allowed him to get close enough to virtually smell his breath. And if Uncle Roy was not mistaken, yes, there it was, a subtle change in his posture. More erect. It was as if invisible balloons were pulling straight up from his chest and from the top back of his head. His chin was down. His head had slid back horizontally on his neck. His head, neck, shoulders and hips were all aligned. He was 'standing tall'. It was as if he had gained an inch in physical height. And a meter in psychological height. Yep. O.P was 'changed'. You'd have to be blind to miss it.

Uncle Roy couldn't help but feel good for O.P. And more than a little excited, if he was to be honest. It was only natural to 'root for the underdog'. O.P was definitely in for a pleasant surprise. He would come into his own. The natural gifts he had been born with, his genetic inheritance, had been reverse-nurtured for years. Today he would experience his true innate potential for the first time.

But his happiness for O.P was also tempered with a fear of the unknown. How would O.P respond to his new-found powers? Would they go to his head? Would the years of bullying explode from him with a rage pent-up of years of frustration and humiliation, pain and misery? Surely it would be too much to expect of a boy. And yet, the qualities that were expected of him, and which would be demanded of him, well, they were more than could be expected of the average kid. O.K. But O.P was no average kid. As he was

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about to find out. And this reminded Uncle Roy that he was going to have a lot of explaining to do when the boy got home.

O.P advanced towards Renshaw, who turned back to his 'mates' for moral support and stimulation. He was in the mood for another beating. Giving out another beating, of course. It was all so predictable. Like clockwork. He would taunt some poor kid while his 'mates' all looked on, psyching out their victim, who, no matter how he might have responded were he alone with Renshaw, inevitably felt powerless when confronted with the entire mob. Inevitably the victim would feel powerless. Defenseless. They would lose all courage. They would feel unable to fight back. It was far from a fair fight. It wasn't intended to be a fight at all. Just a painful humiliation for the victim.

But O.P, suddenly, was not feeling like a victim. He felt a new sense of confidence. He could not account for it. He just felt different. His step felt lighter. His body felt lighter. But he didn't have time to reflect on these changes, as Renshaw had suddenly closed the gap between them, without having moved. Like some sort of vampire, it seemed to O.P. One moment he had been standing, gloating and leering among his mates. And the next he was, all of him, looming up over O.P, glaring down at him, a glow of malice lighting his features up like some personal demon sent to torture, humiliate, and inflict pain on O.P.

From the corner of his eye O.P saw Renshaw's shoulder flinch slightly, and before Renshaw had extended his arm for the intended 'shove', O.P had stepped lightly to the side, leaving Renshaw lurching out into empty space, stumbling almost to the ground from the unchecked inertial momentum of his own movement. He had expected to make contact with O.P's chest, but instead he had fallen into open air.

Renshaw's 'mates' let out a collective gasp of surprise. Renshaw went red in the face. He was now getting angry. He really wanted to 'pay back' O.P for making him look stupid. And so as soon as he had regained his footing, he pulled his elbow back, and stepped into O.P, keen to land a powerful punch to O.P's stomach.

O.P had instinctively anticipated this move, noting a slight change in Renshaw's posture as he prepared for the strike. He wouldn't have been able to explain how it was so, but he just naturally 'read' Renshaw's moves and responded to them. He was somehow aware of what Renshaw was going to do next. It seemed he knew what Renshaw was going to do even before Renshaw, if that was at all possible. It was pure animal instinct.

And suddenly all those moves he had practiced with Uncle Roy, but which he never had seemed able to comprehend, let alone master, seemed to be at his fingertips. Well, in this case, toes. For just as Renshaw launched his fist towards O.P's stomach, O.P took a step to the front and side, and then, hooking his foot behind Renshaw's left knee, gave it a quick flick as he stepped past Renshaw.

Renshaw fell forwards onto the ground, landing in a heap, carried by the forward momentum of his own punch, tripped up by O.P's foot behind his knee. He more or less ended up punching the ground.

O.P had found himself suddenly in possession of an inexplicable 'knowledge' of the exact tipping points of his opponent. He instinctively 'read' every slight change in his opponent's shoulders, head, posture, and footing. He just 'knew' what his next move was going to be. He just 'felt' it instinctively. It just came naturally. He had no fear. He simply knew that his opponent had no chance of laying a finger upon him.

Now Renshaw was really mad. Furious. He seethed with self-righteous rage. At first his 'mates' had been astounded, and a few had even laughed. But none dared to comment now, in the face of Renshaw's total fit of burning, explosive rage. It was terrifying to see. He came charging back at O.P. He was going to tear him apart limb from limb once he got his hands on him.

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Ah yes, but therein lay the problem. Getting his hands on him. In the last moment, just as Renshaw could almost feel the delicious sensation of grabbing O.P.'s neck in his vice-like grip, O.P. would crouch down and to the side, flipping Renshaw over his back with a sudden lifting movement. Just as he had practiced with his Uncle so many times before. Only those times O.P. had fumbled, stumbled, collapsed, lost balance, and well, stuffed it all up. But something had changed within O.P. He could feel the change. Now it all came like magic to him. It was just too easy.

Renshaw went flying through the now empty air. He landed, sprawling in the dirt, at the feet of his 'mates'. They had to step back quickly to avoid being knocked down. Renshaw was now a seething mass of red rage. As he got to his feet 'mates' flew left, right, and center, feeling his fury as he threw his weight around with them. They became the new targets of his impotent rage. They scattered in fear, many with personal 'souvenirs' of the day, in the form of bruises, bleeding lips, and black eyes. Renshaw was going to let someone feel his fury. It had been fine with them when someone else was the victim. But suddenly this playground bullying stuff had lost all its glamor. It simply wasn't fun, and no-one was hanging around to become the next target of Renshaw's volcanic eruption.

Tim's hat had flown off during the clash. O.P. headed over to where it lay on the grass and picked it up. Just as he had it in his hands he 'felt', for want of a better word, Renshaw coming at him from behind. Before he could respond he felt Renshaw's arm come around his neck. It was a dangerous position. If he got the 'choke hold' in place there would be no chance of escape. Renshaw was just too big and powerful.

But O.P. had practiced such a situation with Uncle Roy many times. He reacted instinctively, without conscious thought, and therefore hesitation, forcing his body back towards his aggressor, sinking down vertically, as he forced both his own arms straight upwards between himself and his attacker. The suddenness of the move caught Renshaw off guard for just long enough for O.P. to fall down and out of the closing choke hold. Renshaw was left grasping empty air. He looked and felt foolish. Like he was hugging himself. He felt humiliated. He felt stupid. The whole playground had gathered a few meters from where he now stood, the center of attention. He saw a few of his 'mates' among them. But none of them were standing by him now. In fact he could tell that they were looking forward to watching him make a grand fool of himself in front of the whole school. Maybe even take a thrashing. Because that was what they were expecting. That was what most of them were hoping for. They had been at the receiving end of Renshaw's bullying for years now. And finally it seemed he was going to get his come-uppance.

O.P. had continued his movement in a smooth, flowing line. He fell down and to the side, rolling quickly, switching his feet into an attacking posture, ready to kick, as Renshaw recovered and began to turn. O.P. could see the fear in Renshaw's eyes. It was unmistakable. Though it certainly did not seem to belong there, it had definitely found at least a temporary home.

O.P. felt himself fill with an inexplicably delicious sense of power that seemed to have come from nowhere. And then there was the intoxicating rage. O.P. felt a sudden impulse to hurt his enemy. To crush him. To make him pay. To exact an awful revenge upon him for all his years of bullying misery. These feelings welled up in him. He lost himself to this sudden sense of rage and power. It felt good. O.P. was in position to send a savage kick into Renshaw's exposed side. Renshaw was terrified. 'Where on earth did O.P. learn this stuff', his little brain puzzled. The whole group was watching in awe. Everyone was certain that in the next second O.P. would send a vicious kick into Renshaw's side, and then finish him off with a punch to the temple. It was like watching a set-move in some martial arts film. Everyone was certain of the next 'play'.

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But then to everyone's astonishment O.P seemed to come to himself. He had felt himself being drawn into a glorious, dark, dangerous place. It felt grand. It felt awesome. It felt powerful. But it also felt wrong.

And in the next moment, thought it had felt like a much longer time, O.P emerged from the dark, dangerous place he had been in. Those close enough to see the action in detail had literally 'seen' the metamorphosis in O.P. The O.P they had only ever vaguely noticed as a peripheral blur in their lives, had suddenly become real, solid, mesmerizing, compelling, and full of power and demanding of their attention. Pure charisma. Pure glamor. Pure compulsive viewing.

For a moment it had looked like O.P was going to literally 'destroy' Renshaw. And then suddenly some new change had come over O.P. He went from being the self-absorbed, power-sated, sexy villain in the movie to the shining, humble, hero.

He seemed as shocked as everyone else. He looked physically 'jolted'. As if an electric current had been flowing through him, and the power had suddenly been cut off. He stumbled slightly, as if coming out of a daze.

He sort of shook himself and took a step back. He was 'stepping down', so to speak. Everyone could see the sudden change in his body language. He had gone from a barely controlled wild animal back to something resembling a human boy. But in no way resembling the O.P anyone at the school would have recognised as O.P, if they had bothered to pay him an attention at all, just few moments before.

It was an incredible transformation. Not a single one of the kids there failed to observe it. Uncle Roy saw it clearly in the satellite images.

O.P stepped back, almost apologising for his actions, scared of his own power. He looked at the group who stood silently watching him. He looked at Renshaw, who slowly collected himself, standing upright, but with his head sort of hanging down in an unconscious animal-like acknowledgment of submission to O.P.

Just then it dawned on O.P that he was standing in the middle of the 'playground'. He couldn't help but be appalled at the irony. His experience of that forbidding place bore little resemblance to a 'play' ground. More like a 'battle' ground. A place of constant fear, harassment, humiliation, bullying, misery, and pain. At least up until a few moments ago. And now it really was a playground. He would never have to fear being bullied again. He felt a lightness overcome him. A sense of freedom. Almost like flying. He had not realised how heavy a weight had been bearing down upon him all these years, until it had been thrown off.

Placing Tim's hat on his own head, O.P walked towards the group of Renshaw's 'mates'. They parted as he moved among them, allowing him a free passage through them, and out of the school grounds. He did not turn his head even once. The entire group remained in place, stunned and silent. All heads turned to follow him with their gaze. They then turned to each other, sharing looks of amazement, all asking the same unspoken question. 'What had they just witnessed?' Who was this O.P.? And then the school bell rang, and, shocked out of their silent mystery, they broke up and went their own ways, leaving Renshaw alone. He brushed himself off, and, in a daze of bewilderment, stumbled off home.

O.P had scared himself. That was what lingered. Oh, yes, of course he still needed time to come to terms with his new abilities. But what really hit him was that feeling of power that had come to him in his rage. It had been intoxicating. Unspeakably delicious. It had taken every bit of self-control he possessed not to lash out at his tormentor. He had felt such a powerful desire to do so. And it had taken a lot out of him to deny that dark, aggressive, destructive impulse. If you had told him he even possessed such dark impulses, he would have laughed off the very suggestion as being completely ridiculous.

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It was not a part of his own nature that he would have owned. It was not familiar to him. It was a complete stranger.

He would never have been able to identify with it. But nevertheless there it was. He had felt it welling up within him. For that moment he was almost overcome with a growing wave of desire to humiliate Renshaw, to hurt him. To make him pay. But then he came back to himself. Back to the self he was comfortable with. The good old self. The good-natured boy who didn't wish any harm to anyone. The lad that was full of goodwill for all living things. And that good natured O.P looked upon the enraged, dark, sinister O.P of a few moments ago with dread fear.

He was more than a little disturbed for the first kilometer or so of his walk home. However over time this gave way to a sense of elation at his new-found abilities. His victory over his great enemy. Finally all those tricks his Uncle had tried to teach him had paid off. He couldn't wait to tell his Uncle all about it.

However his great surprise at his new-found abilities was soon to be overwhelmed by even greater, even more amazing discoveries.

Chapter five: Recall

Uncle Roy suddenly became aware of the burden he had been carrying, as a massive wave of relief passed through him as that burden dissolved. 'O.P had come through!' he reflected with jubilation. He let himself bathe in the satisfying glow of success for a few moments. 'Just enjoy the moment Commander Roy', he thought to himself. Then he guiltily considered how he had 'broken character' in his own mind, and had referred to himself by his rank. No such mishaps could be risked. The fact that he had committed this 'error' sobered him completely. It reminded him of the importance of his mission. He could not risk relaxing his tight discipline. Too much depended upon him. Or more precisely upon O.P. It was much too soon to celebrate. And he could not afford to betray himself in any way to anyone. He must remain in character. He must continue to be 'Uncle Roy' for a time yet.

Just that moment a blinking blue light appeared at the extreme of his peripheral vision. He instinctively turned toward it. It danced and played across his retina. Only he could see it. He then appeared to rub the hollow of his left ear with his right hand, his face a picture of concentration. It was as if he was intently listening to something. But there was nothing to listen to. Or was there?

Uncle Roy was listening into the transponder that had been fused into his cheek-bone. It was activated by placing pressure on the tissue just below the left ear.

His eyes suddenly flared in surprise. He mouthed the word that he repeated over and over inside his head. 'Recall'. He listened for the verification code. 'Verification code formatting. Verify. Good-faith and good-will. Initiate recall protocols. Urgency level blue'.

'Blue?', he whispered to himself. He became full of a sense of urgency. Blue was just one level below 'Orange'. Orange would have meant more or less drop everything, get the boy, and get out of there. 'Blue' meant that something very serious must be in the works. Something important enough to throw the schedule completely out the window. Something really big.

Across the galaxy the same message was being relayed to the 12 remaining Makrus clones. They would be pulled from the furthest reaches of the galaxy back to the center of empire. Back to the Emperor.

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Uncle Roy quickly went to the far wall and unlocked that cupboard that was always locked. The one O.P had always been curious about.

As he opened the lock, he began a psychological and physical transformation in which he would metamorphose from 'Uncle Roy' back to Imperial Fleet commander Destin. But much more than that. For Destin was also a captain of the EPG, the most elite cadre of the Emperor's personal guard. He was one of a rare breed. He felt a wave of satisfaction rush over him as he began the metamorphosis. He felt much more comfortable in uniform. And in the role of protector and fleet commander. He missed the automatic respect his rank inspired in others. His sense of achievement. For so long now he had had to hide his 'light'. Now he could shine again. And shine he did, with a glowering incandescence that simmered just behind his eyes, radiating confidence and authority to anyone who might meet that gaze.

Uncle Roy, the role he had been playing all these years, had served his purposes, this was true. Destin was proud of his accomplishments as 'Uncle Roy', in re-producing the childhood experiences of Makrus the Optimiser. But Commander Destin was, if he was going to be honest with himself, a bit fed up playing the single parent pensioner with an interest in electronics. He was extremely relieved to be back in the 'action' role. Action was, after all, the main attraction that had lead Destin to join the Imperial Guard. Babysitting had put a real strain on his nerves. It was much easier facing a hostile enemy than dealing with the pubescent problems of a teenager!

Destin had originally been unsure whether he would be up to the assignment. It had been pushed upon him by the highest levels of the Imperial Special Services branch. Finally he had received an informal visit from the Emperor herself. Of course there was no saying 'no' after that. You did not say no to her Imperial Highness.

He had qualified first as 'Operational Psycho-Historian class theta'. Psycho-historians specialised in determining the effects of a person's history, the impact on their psyche of the events that happen to them and how they respond to them, and what consequences these could be expected to have on the development of their character and personality. He had studied, in agonising depth, all the great people of history. The nice and the vicious. The creatively productive and the destructive. He knew O.P's 'father' better than anyone in the galaxy. And his 'father' had been dead for 53 generations.

He had then survived the toughest Special Forces training in the galaxy. O.K. Only after the third attempt. But there was no shame in that. Few people in the galaxy would even have dared even attempt that course. And this after qualifying as a psycho-historian. An academic. A thinker. A cross between a sociologist, a psychologist, and a historian. The trainers on the elite Special Forces training course had not taken his application seriously, until they saw him in action.

They were keen to meet a 'socio-historian' in person, but had grave doubts that someone of that mental caliber would endure the rigors of a training program that ground most applicants down to sobbing heaps. It was not just a question of physical capability. For the courses deliberately pushed each candidate past their personal physical limits. The point was to force them to draw on their inner psychological strength. That was the key. No matter how great the candidates strength and endurance, they would break them. That was the point of the testing. You only saw the real 'person' inside the shell after you had broken it.

Even famous athletes had broken down, begging to be let off-course, despite the humiliation they might face after having bragged to the world of their abilities. It was not a question of what you could do. It was more about how you would deal with being forced beyond your limits. The applicants were all screened, and of the highest physical

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condition. But what the recruiters were looking for was something you could not easily measure until it came into play.

Experience had taught just how costly it can be to find out, in the field, in the heat of operations, how people would respond. You just couldn't tell from mere test scores. You had to physically and mentally push people to breaking point, to see what you got when they did break. And break they would. For everyone had a limit. And how they responded when they reached this limit, and more importantly, were pushed beyond this limit, well, it was this that ultimately decided the success of an operation, or its failure.

Destin proved one of the most determined applicants they had ever seen. And so they gave him a chance. Well, three chances. And he was not one to let any chance pass him by.

It was that dual qualification that qualified him for the most secret program in the Imperial services. He was probably the only psycho-historian in, well, history, who could not only enlighten you of your misconceptions, but also enlighten you of the burden of your life, literally. He could break your neck before you could even begin wondering who the hell he was, and what the hell he was doing in your room explaining the illusion of free will.

And while every informed citizen in the galaxy was aware of the selection process for Imperial Emperor, the first 16 years of life of the 'proto-emperors', the clones of Makrus, were a complete mystery to all but a tiny minority of the personal guard of the Emperor. Perhaps no more than two dozen people were included in this most exclusive of 'inner circles'. And O.P.'s 'Uncle', Commander Destin, was proud to count himself among them. A true 'insider'.

Chapter Six: O.P rushes home to find...

When O.P got home he came scrambling into the kitchen, threw his school things down on the table, and then raced into his Uncle's 'hobby' room. Only his Uncle wasn't there. What was there was like something out of a science fiction movie. O.P saw the back of an athletic looking man in a tight fitting military uniform of some kind. He was leaning over a dazzling 3-D hologram in which O.P could see a number of other men and women in the same sort of uniforms. For all its strangeness, the uniformed figure also felt somehow quite familiar.

Then the figure turned. O.P felt himself bodily frozen with curiosity and excitement. His feet were glued to the spot as his eyes were glued to image of the uniformed man. 'This couldn't be? No. It just couldn't. And yet?' O.P's thoughts were racing faster than he could keep up with them.

It took O.P a few double takes before he recognised the few familiar hints of 'Uncle Roy' that remained in Commander Destin's features. But the transformation had been extreme and impressive. Before O.P stood someone who was definitely not Uncle Roy, no matter what physical features he might have had in common him. This man literally bristled with energy. He looked like a tight-wound spring vibrating in anticipation of being uncoiled. Like a panther poised to strike. His eyes shone brightly. For a moment O.P was actually scared of this, this, well, this science fiction comic book figure standing there where he was accustomed to find his old Uncle Roy tinkering with this or that electrical gadget.

Commander Destin saw this fear, and deliberately, consciously, melted back into what for O.P, would be the familiar, comforting, form of good old Uncle Roy. The boy needed

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a chance to adapt to the changes. 'They must be overwhelming for the boy', he reflected.

O.P responded immediately to the change from Commander Destin back to Uncle Roy. His trustworthy, reliable Uncle Roy. His Uncle was solicitous for his well-being and happiness. O.P responded to that caring, nurturing persona automatically. He unconsciously relaxed, mentally and physically.

Commander Destin noted this and reminded himself to take it easy with the boy. 'No need to scare the lad', he thought to himself. 'Just imagine how you would feel, Roy, if you were in his position. Empathy. That was what he needed to exercise right now. Put himself in the lad's position. Try to make it as easy as possible for him. This is all going to come as a terrible surprise to him. Give him a chance to ease into it all.'

And so Commander Destin put as much of old Uncle Roy into his manner and voice as he could, as he began explaining the key facts of his, and O.P's, real situation.

Chapter Seven: Commander Destin introduces himself to O.P, and then introduces O.P to *himself*

'Uncle Roy' first showed O.P the recording he had made of O.P's recent victory over the school bully, Renshaw. It was incredible enough that he would have satellite footage of the events, but what puzzled, and even excited O.P, was the strange comment Uncle Roy had made. 'I know your father will be proud of you'.

Immediately, O.P jumped on the comment, first thinking his Uncle must have meant 'would have been'. 'You said will be? Don't you mean would have been?'

Uncle Roy 'replied' with a very pregnant look. A look which indicated that there were going to be a lot more surprises in store for O.P.

A lot of secrets were going to be revealed. O.P was sure of it. This was going to be one big day full of surprises. Surprise just filled the air to bursting point. O.P shone with an exhilarated sense of expectation. A readiness for many more surprises and revelations. At some level of his unconscious he had been expecting such a day for many years. He had had some sixth sense that things were not, could not, be as they appeared. However up until this very day he had never had any concrete notions of just what didn't add up. Just that it didn't add up. It all 'smelled' funny, for want of a better expression.

Wasn't this how all 'Cinderella' stories started? Wasn't this the archetype for all those Hollywood film's O.P had watched on their old television? A poor, humble, battered young girl or boy discovers that they are not who they appear to be? That they are in fact special? With a special destiny? So O.P was very guarded. He didn't want to get his hopes up. There might still be a simple explanation for all this. Maybe he was dreaming? Maybe Renshaw had knocked him out and he was laying, this very moment, in the dust, and all this was a fantasy that his own mind had constructed in order to ease his pain and humiliation? But no. It was real. He was some sort of Cinderella boy. Like the hero of all his favorite Science Fiction adventures. Harry Potter had nothing on him! This was all happening. And to him. O.P.

Only who, then, was O.P. Who was he? Really? The O.P who had just made a joke of Renshaw in the playground. The O.P who had felt a surge of power flowing through him. And a desire to crush his opponent. To bathe in the delicious satisfaction of revenge that had burned in him, begging to be tasted. He did not know those two O.P's. They had appeared as complete strangers to him. And yet they were, it was impossible to deny, a genuine part of him. He had done that and felt that.

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What more was there to O.P.? Was that really his name? And if all he had thought was true of himself had proven to be false. A lie. Without being conscious of it, his mind raced far ahead of him. Suddenly a sense of hope flared in O.P. Destin saw the hope flashing in O.P.'s countenance. He immediately intuited what O.P. was thinking. And feeling. Of course. His parents.

And so the first bit of news Destin shared with O.P. was one of the biggies. He was not an orphan. But what he was, exactly, was even stranger. So strange he couldn't quite get his head around it. So Uncle Roy didn't go into details on that front. But what he did explain was still enough to blow O.P.'s mind.

Now it is not an uncommon thing to hear children around the galaxy complaining about their parents now and then. But while some parents really are horrible, and should never have been allowed to have children in the first place, most kids would give up everything to keep theirs. They might get in the way of a lot of fun, to be sure. But to be fair, they were there when you needed them. They worked hard to make sure you had a home and clothes and all the stuff you took for granted. They cooked and cleaned and cared for you. They were the giver of accepting, approving, words, smiles, and cuddles. They got angry when you were naughty, but they always forgave you. When all the world seemed to be against you. They were always for you.

While some kids are lucky to have two parents, most have one. It just seems that lots of adults can't manage their conflicts any better than children. Sooner or later they find they just can't get on as well as they used to, and they decide they would be better off finding other friends they don't fight with all the time. If the kids are lucky, they still get to see a lot of both of them. They usually end up living with their mum, and spending week-ends and holidays with dad. They might have to put up with each parent bad-mouthing the other, and their constant childish bickering over little things, but all in all they do pretty well under the conditions.

Even worse, sometimes one parent dies. Life is not fair. It can be cruel. And now and then the worst thing imaginable occurs, and a child might lose both parents in some tragic accident.

But imagine never ever having had any parents at all. I mean ever. Never ever.

'How could this be?' you ask. Surely everyone knows that all animals have parents. Maybe both don't hang around to look after the kids, and maybe often they don't do much of a job of it, but still, everyone had to have at least had parents. I mean, without getting all yucky and explicit, there's, well, sex. A man and a woman. Your father and mother. Well at least biological father and mother. I mean, it's not unknown for children to have parents who were not their biological father or mother. Parents get re-married, and the kids get a new father or mother. Kids sometimes get a marvelous second chance, with new parents.

Or same sex parents ask a man or woman to be a 'sperm' or 'egg' donor, or even 'host mother'. Then it gets a little confusing, biologically speaking.

But in the end it is really very simple and very clear. Whoever cares for you, loves you, accepts you, approves of you, supports you, looks after you, cuddles you, and worries about you. All that really nice warm fuzzy stuff. It's clear that they are your parents. Whether or not they are biologically your parents.

Biology is just genes. It is your genetic potential. But whether you manage to make good on all that potential is determined by all that other stuff you inherit. What sort of parents you have. How much money they have. Where they live. What schools they send you too. What sort of country you live in. Whether it is peaceful and prosperous or some poor place in the middle of a war zone. Together these things all make up your holistic inheritance. You can't do anything about any of them. It is just a matter of luck.

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If you are lucky, you have it all. Loving, caring, happy parents, and a great life. If you are unlucky? Well, then you'd better hope that the lucky people are generous, and willing to share their luck with you. Otherwise you're going to have to learn to go without a lot of stuff that really makes the difference between enjoying a life, and enduring a life.

But what of O.P? He had been told that his parents had both died when he was very young. A terrible tragedy. Truly horrible luck. Only he could not recall any specific details. And he could not remember anything about them at all. Only the things his Uncle had told him. But that was just like listening to stories about strangers he'd never met.

And now. Right this moment? Uncle Roy, well, whoever this man was, wanted O.P to understand that he was, what?, a clone of some Galactic Emperor who had died 52 generations ago. Thousands of years ago. Not just that, but one of 14 other clones. All sent to the furthest reaches of the galaxy to grow up in personal and social conditions as close as possible to those of their 'donor', their 'father', Makrus the Optimiser. But why?

Well, because apparently his followers had decided to leave as little to chance as possible. They would ensure each clone had as similar a holistic inheritance as the first Makras as possible. In this way they hoped, Uncle Roy explained, to reproduce the most desirable qualities present in Makras, those qualities that had made his reign the 'golden age' of the galaxy. Makras was in possession not only of a fine mind, but a higher nature. He had been full of good will. He was full of compassion for all living things. He always acted in good faith. He was incorruptible. He was so good natured he had never ever thought for a moment to give in to the impulse to act opportunistically. All his actions had been founded on the highest ethical principles.

It was combination of qualities that his followers had feared might never be found again in an Emperor. And should another individual be found with these qualities, it was going to be a struggle to get them recognised as legitimate heirs to the throne. And so it came to pass that the Emperors closest advisers had come up with the plan that had ultimately 'given birth' to O.P, so to speak.

It was decided that firstly they would clone the Emperor, and secondly, attempt, through a thorough program of micro-managed nurturing, to seek to reproduce the Emperor's holistic inheritance. They hoped to reproduce the conditions, stimuli, situations, and experiences that had allowed the original Makras to develop those aspects of his genetic potential that had made him the optimal leader. The only person that could be trusted with power. For he had never abused it. He had proven beyond corruption. He had proven the wisest of leaders history had ever produced, and which they, the social historians, with their complex, intricate plans, hoped they might reproduce.

But genes tended not to 'breed true', so it was decided to produce 14 clones. 7 female and 7 male. They would be brought up separately, then brought back 'home' for a series of selection trials. They would be evaluated, assessed, rigorously tested, to find which of the clones approached, in character and talent, closest to the original Makras. The clone scoring the highest in this round of selection tests would become the 'Emperor in waiting'.

A question suddenly began to form in O.P's brain. His sudden change in posture announced it. But before the question could form from the vague depths of his unconscious, or, if you like, reach 'the tip of his tongue', Uncle Roy was answering it. 'Yes, this means you have 13 brothers and sisters. And your legal parents are in fact the current Galactic Empress and Emperor. And, yes, it seems we are all going home. To our *true* home.'

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O.P couldn't believe it. His real home. Parents. Brothers and sisters. *Family!*

Orphan? Welfare child? Poor and humble? O.P's mind had to shift several gears on this account. O.P was used to the idea of being a poor kid from a welfare dependent, single carer family. The very idea that he was perhaps next in line to become the future Emperor of an entire galaxy was just too silly to bother trying to comprehend. If not for the uniform, the satellite recording, the 3.D holograph communications he had witnessed, and Uncle Roy's straight forward, no nonsense, completely reliable and caring history with O.P so far, he would have dismissed the whole affair as some sort of joke.

But there it was. The 3.D holographic communicator continued in the background to show a number of men and women, dressed like Uncle Roy was now attired, the same uniforms. O.P decided he would make sure that wasn't some sort of new computer game. And so he addressed the figures in the holograph. Uncle Roy understood immediately what O.P was on about, and so he gestured towards him to come closer. He then placed a device over his ear.

'Good afternoon your highness', came the greeting from the lady who had stepped forward from the group, and who was now apparently addressing O.P.

'Go ahead O.P, just talk as you would if she were here, the device over your ear will act as communicator', his Uncle suggested.

'Um. Well. I. Ah. Hello I guess. And. Well. Who are you? I mean. And where are you? And, well, what's this 'your highness' business. And. I mean. How do I know this isn't some sort of new computer game? Some sort of hoax. A practical joke. Only I've no idea why Uncle Roy would lie to me. I mean he has never lied to me before. Why I have no idea. But. You know. This is all. Well.' O.P stuttered and stumbled out the words with no coherent order or plan.

'Yes we understand this must come as a great shock to you. But we promise it will be a pleasant one. I have orders to send a ship for your recall back to Aitah'... The speaker cut off as she was interrupted by a colleague speaking quietly in her ear...'Yes, I mean, your home planet. This of course is all so sudden that Commander Destin, I mean, your Uncle, will not have had time to explain much. But we will do our best. We are at your service, to answer any questions you may have, Your *highness*'.

Uncle Roy felt a twinge of guilt at O.P's words. The complete trust he had put in him. His belief that he had never lied. But the entire thing had been a lie. Their life together had been nothing but a lie. Any lies he had told O.P had been 'noble' lies, for sure. But still a deception. Except the part about O.P being able to trust Destin. That was no lie. Destin would have, and still would, give his life to protect O.P.

And so Commander Destin watched as a succession of emotions fought for control of O.P's face. First surprise would become dominant, hold ground, but then this assertiveness would retreat in the face of confusion. Then his face would register something like sadness, but this would quickly be succeeded by a series of very positive emotions, from curiosity, to optimistic expectancy, and even a glimmer of actual happiness. Within this there also appeared momentary flashes of anger.

Chapter Eight: Renshaw arrives with urgent news, and an unlikely friendship begins

Then Commander Destin's attention was abruptly torn away from the boy. A burst of very insistent and determined knocking announced, with a genuine sense of urgency,

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that someone down here on this planet, right now at their door, had something important to communicate with them.

Uncle Roy went to answer it. It took him a moment to recognise the child from the satellite recording. It was O.P's arch nemesis. That big bully Renshaw.

Before Uncle Roy could even begin to wonder what he might be doing here, Renshaw blurted out in an excited, breathless voice 'Is O.P here? I've got to speak to him. It's really important. It's...' but Renshaw suddenly took in the appearance of O.P's Uncle, now dressed in his Imperial Guards uniform. It threw him completely. He sort of recognised him as O.P's 'guardian', but he'd never really paid him that much attention. He had never represented either a threat, or an opportunity. And so like any predator, Renshaw had been indifferent to his presence. But now Renshaw had lost track of his thoughts. First that freak show 'terminator' looking for O.P at the school, and now this...this...what was he supposed to be dressed as?... was he off to some science fiction convention or something?' Renshaw's mind flew from idea to idea so quickly it felt like the ground beneath his feet could not keep up, and was giving way beneath his feet.

Then, looking past O.P's strangely dressed Uncle, Renshaw saw O.P standing back in the hall. Suddenly he remembered that he had just now run all the way from school to tell O.P something. 'Yes. That was it' he suddenly recollected. 'Some sort of terminator dudes came looking for you today. And I have to say they didn't seem to be welfare workers. I overheard the, things, speaking to each other in some sort of gibberish, and I swear one even took one of his eyeballs right out of his head, played around with it like he was fixing it or something, and then pushed it back in. What's going on here anyway?', Renshaw finished, gasping for breath after the run. He then made a limp sweeping gesture of his arm which included Uncle Roy and ended pointing down the hall at the strange glow that was coming from Destin's room at the end of it. His arm then fell to his side as he bowed forward, trying to regain his breath, completely exhausted and panting.

At the mention of 'eyeballs' being 'pushed back in' Uncle Roy, now Commander Destin once more, felt a rush of adrenaline and a slight 'sinking feeling'. 'Engodith', he said aloud. 'Not good'. And then to himself, 'but how on earth did they discover his location? What was going on here? What were the assassins of Engodith doing on earth? And at O.P's school. So close. This is an unacceptable breach. How did they get here without my knowing?'.

These thoughts were flooding his mind, the gaps across his synapses sparking and flooding with electro-chemical transmitters, reckoning and re-reckoning, always pressing for answers. But there was no time to wait for answers. There was no time to lose. Hesitation could cost them their lives, and more importantly, the life of the next in line to the Emperor's throne.

Just as these thoughts entered his mind, the orange flash of an 'immediate recall' blazed across his retina. And then from his 'hobby-room' all three heard the calls from the holograph. 'Commander Destin. This is a code orange immediate recall protocol initiation. You are to re-locate immediately and await contact. Repeat. Threat imminent. Relocate immediately.'

O.P looked at Uncle Roy. Renshaw's gaze settled first on the one, and then the other of the pair. His racing mind was clumsily stumbling over itself trying to connect the few dots that it had at its disposal. That freak show at school. The science fiction military uniform. O.P's martial arts show yesterday. And that strange glow coming from the room down the hall.???? Renshaw, slipping by Uncle Roy, headed down the hall, past O.P, almost lunging into the room in his haste, before being suddenly stopped in his tracks by the 3-D, life-sized, holographic image. Three men and women, dressed just like O.P's Uncle, were facing him with puzzled looks. Behind them Renshaw could see what

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appeared to be banks of computers and a glass window facing out on some sort of science fiction city of the future. His mind struggled with this as his eyes focused first on the background, and then back upon the uniformed figures that began speaking. He vaguely noted that their focus then shifted just behind himself. They were no longer looking at him when they saluted. 'Your highness'. 'Commander Destin'. They appeared to be addressing O.P and his Uncle. Their gaze then settled again on Renshaw, before returning, with questioning looks, to Uncle Roy.

Uncle Roy immediately sought to answer the unspoken question. 'Ah, this is...ah' Uncle Roy began, not quite sure how to finish.

To his relief O.P then filled the pregnant vacancy with 'Toby Renshaw, ... A friend of mine'.

Renshaw's face flashed in astonishment at that utterance. From O.P of all people. He was still getting his breath back. He had been hit with one shock after another. It was all too much for him to process. His mind simply de-coupled. It switched into neutral. He was just coasting now. Not thinking much at all. Just going with the flow. Whatever was going on here would have to be explained another time. Right now he was merely focused on not losing his mind.

Chapter Nine: Time to go

'We have to leave this place immediately. There is not telling what danger you are in' Commander Destin explained, his voice a little more imperious than he had intended. O.P couldn't help wonder how this new man before him had been inside of Uncle Roy all these years, without ever having given a hint of its presence.

'You mean we are in, don't you?' O.P corrected him.

'Yes, well, what matters is your safety. I am expendable. But you are not.' Destin replied, matter-of-factly.

Renshaw watched as Destin pulled out a number of matt black and polished aluminum things and placed them in a black zippered bag. He then handed O.P an outfit to put on. It was similar to his own. 'Like the body armor the French riot control police wore on tele in that documentary the other night', Renshaw thought to himself. When O.P zipped up the uniform it sort of 'filled out' in various places, expanding, and then appearing to harden into new shapes. He casually 'hit' a button located on the chest of the now hard outfit, and a bright light blazed up all around him.

Renshaw put his hands up to his eyes to protect them from the dazzling, coruscating light-show that was swirling and dancing around O.P. He could smell burning ozone.

O.P had to overcome his own surprise before he could think straight and hit the button again. Then suddenly the light-show disappeared.

'Look, sorry we don't have time for me to explain all the workings of all this stuff. But please', he added almost exasperatedly, 'please don't push any more buttons again for the time being. O.K?'

Just then a worry entered O.P's mind. 'What about Renshaw?'

Destin reflected at how thoughtful the lad was. It would place him in good stead in the selection trials. 'If only he managed to get him to the trials', was the thought that immediately rushed to his consciousness. 'O.K. Renshaw, is it? It's your call. Are you coming with us? If not, you'd better get away from here as quickly as you can, and not show your face around here again for a while.

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'No way. I mean. For sure. I mean. Sir.' Renshaw added in a show of respect that O.P would never have thought him capable of. 'Yes. I'm coming. If that's O.K. I wouldn't miss this for the world'.

And with this the two boys followed Destin out the back of the house, and down the lane. 'You boys wait here a moment', he called back over his shoulder, in a voice that was very quiet and deep, intended only to travel as far as the boy's ears, and no further.

O.P looked to Renshaw, both wondering what the next surprise was going to be. They didn't have long to wait. The old metal garage door opened just as the Engodith arrived at the door of their semi. They appeared to be taking instructions over some sort of ear-piece. Nodding to each other, they played out their trained, rehearsed roles. Without making any noise, the two assassins broke up, one going around the back, the other quietly opening the lock of the front door with a small metallic device.

O.P's eyes were suddenly drawn to the direction of what had been his home for the last 13 years or so. A bright light was pulsing from the roof. There was a rush of hot air as the two floors that had once been his, if modest, home, suddenly 'imploded'. That was the only fitting word. *Imploded*. And then there was a slight rumbling of the ground beneath their feet, as subtle shock-waves traveled outwards from where the semi-detached house had stood. Dust rose up into the air in a small mushroom cloud before settling back down into what appeared, for all intensive purposes, a completely vacant lot.

Just then Destin appeared in some sort of, well, what else could you call it, but 'space-craft'. For that was what it was. A small space ship of some sorts. The roof slid back in two places, and the two boys quickly got in.

The roof pieces slid back seamlessly into the roof, and the roof was one continuous piece once more.

O.P heard Destin chuckle, and then explain, in about the lightest hearted tone O.P had yet heard out of his Uncle, 'That's two assassin's King Aitah is going to have to replace, if I am not mistaken'. And then he added, O.P sensed for his own benefit. 'Oh, but don't worry, we'll pay the damages. Enough for the council to rebuild the whole street, if I am not mistaken. And no chance of a casual bystander being hurt. Their pheromones triggered the charges. Engodith body chemistry is very different to humans. Looks like we got away just in time.'

In a bewildered, astonished, almost numb state, O.P looked at Destin. He looked at Renshaw. He looked out the side 'windows' of the vehicle as they left, not just their now non-existent semi, but the ground. They angled up steeply, and suddenly there was a great distance between them, and, well, the ground. That was about as well as you could express it. For there was no rush of acceleration. No G-forces of any seriousness to mention. It was just as if the ground had suddenly fallen away from them. It was falling away at an increasing rate until suddenly they could see the horizon, and above it, the blackness of space. In no time at all the earth became that poster of it that every school-kid has seen. A lovely blue-green sphere. The two boys exchanged looks of incredulity as Destin played with some of the controls.

Chapter Ten: More revelations, and a stowaway is discovered

Renshaw took this moment to put a question to O.P which had been hounding him ever since the other day. 'Why didn't you sock it to me O.P? I mean, I deserved it. I've made life hell for you. I just don't get it. Everyone says you could have slammed me good and proper. Everyone was sure you were going to give it to me. But then they say you just

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got up and walked away. I don't get it. But anyway, thanks. I mean, not that I would've cared much for whatever you might have done to me. But. Well. You see. It's like this. It's my step-dad. See. He is always on about how he hates weakness. And. Like. If I had of turned up home with a black eye and a few bruises from you, well, he would have really laid into me good and proper like. So, like, you saved me from a really bad beating O.P.'

This was the first time O.P had given the matter much thought. He'd just taken it for granted that Renshaw was a bully who simply enjoyed beating up on the less popular, and therefore more vulnerable, kids. It suddenly occurred to him that maybe there was more to it than that.

'Sounds pretty bad. I had no idea. Have you ever tried talking to Social about him?' he asked, referring to Social Services, in a tone of genuine concern that had a dramatic effect on Renshaw. He was not used to people showing any care about his welfare. 'I mean. Does he beat you?' O.P asked him, genuinely worried for him. But Renshaw suddenly became very withdrawn and silent. O.P figured that was as good an answer as any. So he decided to change the subject. 'Thanks for saving us, by the way.'

At this Renshaw suddenly brightened and expanded again. 'Ah, that was nothing. That's just what real mates do. I mean, not like those kids at school who hang around with me. I mean real mates. Any one of them would have been the first to lay into me themselves, given half a chance. They were more disappointed than anything, after you left me there. Nah, I was just doing what mates should do. You know. Like. Look out for each other and stuff.' O.P got the impression from Renshaw's words, and more, the way he delivered them, indicated that a lot more had happened than he was letting on. He appeared a very changed person. He also appeared to have attached himself to O.P. And O.P hadn't the heart to reject him. For he knew how that felt. He'd had years of it. It really sucked.

All this talk of friends got O.P to thinking about Tim, but before he could follow this train of thought to its likely destination of gloom, Destin opened up some sort of display in the front screen of O.P's side of the space-ship. It lit up and began displaying two people laughing and joking in the distance. Then a female voice that sounded somehow familiar behind the camera filming them called to them. And it was then that O.P suddenly made out who the two people were. It was PRI and Tim.

'There are a few more surprises' Destin warned, keeping his eyes forward, but turning now and then to look at O.P. 'I didn't know quite how to let you know. So, well, I thought I'd best let these two explain. Please keep in mind that I have been under strict orders, following very specific protocols. I will understand if you are mad at me. At us, I mean'.

And it was a real shock. Tim was there with PRI. Only he couldn't be. Tim was dead? Then Tim's mother appeared from behind the camera. 'We're sorry to have had to deceive you in such a terrible way, Your Highness, but we were following strict orders. We hope you will find it in your heart to forgive us one day', Tim's mum...well hang on...who was she really? Was anyone who they had claimed to be? Was everyone playing a game with him? He looked to Renshaw, expecting some similar confession and apology.

Renshaw looked at him and shrugged his shoulders. 'Hey, don't look at me, I have no idea what's going on here, ah 'Your Highness', Renshaw added in a tone of apparent genuine respect. O.P gave him a wondering look. Renshaw smiled. He radiated a sense of genuine admiration. He seemed proud of the title that had been bestowed upon his new found friend.

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Just then O.P felt something soft and furry jump into his lap. At first he was startled, having been so highly primed for excitement and surprises. Then he laughed at his own nervousness. 'It's a cat', he exclaimed. 'Must have stowed away on board. Unless, that is, of course, it's got some confession to make too?' O.P joked.

Everyone laughed and the tension was relieved. O.P figured he would have time to find out exactly what was going on. Tim was alive. He was with PRI.

'Will Tim and PRI be coming wherever we're going, Uncle, I mean, Commander...ah...what exactly do I call you now?'

'How about among 'friends', which I hope we still are, we stick to Roy? O.K?'

'Sure thing Roy. Roy, this is Renshaw, another of my 'friends'. O.P really loved the sound of that word. Friends. His friends. He had friends. Wow. Friends. His! And this here is, well,...I guess we have a stowaway on board. And may I ask exactly where we are going?'

'Hello Renshaw. I have to admit you've earned your place on this craft. Thank you again for the timely warning. I dread to think what might have happened if those assassins had caught us off guard.' His words and manner impressed Renshaw no end. Even more than any title like 'Your Majesty' might. He beamed with self-esteem and pride. His nervous system was in a total muddle. It was the first time it had had to deal with genuine praise. Not like the sarcastic 'praise' of his parents and teachers. This was the first genuinely positive experience Renshaw had ever had with an adult.

Destin gave Renshaw a look of acceptance and approval before adopting a light hearted tone and adding. 'And as for the 'stowaway', well...' They all laughed, and O.P gave the cat a cuddle and a mock-serious look while Renshaw leaned over and gave it a gentle, friendly petting.

Then Destin, checking his instruments, continued. 'First we will be rendezvousing with an Imperial Cruiser, where you will have a chance to meet up with Tim and PRI again. They will be traveling back home with us. Their mission is over now that we have all been recalled. And before you ask me why we have been recalled, well, you're guess is as good as mine. But it must be something important. And as for the assassins. Well. It seems your 'friend' here has made up for making your life hell by pretty much saving it.'

'Oh, and, Renshaw wasn't it?, well, I hope you won't mind, but for the time being you're going to have to stay with us. But when we dock with the cruiser, best you just keep quiet and stay with O.P until we can work out your status. I mean, if that is O.K by you, your highness. This last he directed towards O.P.

'Yes. Yes of course...Uncle..., I mean, Roy. Oh, and let's not forget the cat. She's beautiful. I always wanted a cat.' And the cat seemed to understand his words, or at least his sentiments, for she cuddled up closer to him, purring deeply and contentedly in his lap.

'Yes, well, I have no idea how I'm going to explain that one. But I can't see how anyone would dare question your royal privilege to bring a cat on board, if you see fit. I'm sure it is well within the Imperial prerogative'. There was something in his tone that O.P did not quite comprehend. But there was something a little suspicious about his manner. 'We will all be thoroughly screened for pathogens and decontaminated before being released into the general population, so I can't see as any harm could come of it'.

Destin would never admit the fact that he himself had 'smuggled' the cat on-board. It would be his little secret. Well their secret, of course. I mean the cat and him! He was glad that the cat and O.P had taken to each other. It would do O.P a world of good', Destin thought to himself. Cats were great 'therapy'. And if he were to be honest he'd have to admit that he had developed a fondness for them in his years on earth. Sort of

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reminded him of the Trengar he'd had as a kid. One of the few animals on his planet that had remained A.O, 'After Optimisation'.

And Destin's research had indicated some references that Makras the Optimaliser had made to some sort of pet he himself had 'owned' as a child. And the idea of the whole 'environmental re-production' was to re-produce the childhood experiences of Makrus as closely as possible, so the cat was perfectly in keeping with Destin's official duties. Well at least that is how Destin justified it to himself. In reality he just thought that the cat was adorable, and that O.P could do with some affection right now. The sort of unequivocal love that only a pet can give.

There were a few moments of quiet as each of the three contemplated their own current situation. And the cat? But this was not to last. 'Hey is that really you Destin?'. Destin recognised the voice at once, and couldn't help but smile. It was Captain Meerings. 'Hey, did you hear what happened to that renegade Prince we were chasing that time? Well it seems something he ate disagreed with him. Or was that, someone he ate? Heh heh! Those cannibals. Ah. Well. Yes. Where were we? Well, Destin old man, looks like you have the pleasure of my company once more. We've been sent to hold some crazy genius's hand and see to it that he and his precious brain get back to Operation HQ in as few pieces as possible. You'll receive your official orders...'

He was interrupted on his end as a very impersonal voice, probably computer generated, began repeating 'verification protocols instigating in three, two, one. Verify. Good nature. Good will. Good faith. Commander Destin. You are to report to co-ordinates to follow, to evacuate civilian name of Luc Deacon. Details to follow'.

'..Yes, as I was saying until I was rudely interrupted, old man, we're to pick up this guy and bring him on home. Seems they think he has some information that is of such great value that they had to ruin my holiday. Some sort of tech wizard. If my sources are right, he actually wrote the code for the Nano-tech which...well, anyhow, top level stuff. So we'll be rendezvousing on...let me see...if I can just get this new navigation tech working...ah, yeh, that's it...looks like we're bound for Doonsly, old man.'

'Yeh yeh Meerings. Enough of the 'old'. If I remember correctly, I kicked your ass at the last unit 'hand to hand' trials. And, Meer, old buddy...'

'Yeh, what is it Commander?'

'Well', Destin replied after a pregnant pause. 'Let's not let this one go the way of that 'pick-up' on Jensing. O.K?'

At first there was silence on Deacon's end. And then then suddenly the cabin of Destin's ship was full of Meerings' laughter.'

At this O.P and Renshaw gave each other puzzled looks, which they then directed to Destin. 'That?', he replied to the looks. 'Oh, look, we don't really have time to...ah...', and then, clearly wanting to change the subject, he went on to explain that they would be landing shortly on a new planet to pick up someone. They would then be changing craft to continue their journey.

O.P and Renshaw again exchanged glances, wondering if they both had seen that slight look of embarrassment that had crept into Destin's face, before vanishing, as if it had never been there. As if Destin had never, ever, in his life, ever been embarrassed.

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Chapter Eleven: Luc Deacon, Broken (?) genius?

As they flew through the vast emptiness of space on auto-pilot, Destin opened up the files he'd just received from Operational HQ. It contained a few pages of classified documents relating to Luc Deacon's previous work with the huge galactic tech colossus that was 'Unicom Holdings'. The huge inter-galactic trading company that seemed to have a hand in every new technological venture, and a finger in every 'pie', so to speak. It traded in everything from rare earths required for the Nano-technology in the latest 'Nano-pharm (pharmaceuticals)' and Nano-componentry for super computers, right down to the most basic agricultural commodities.

What interested his bosses was his leading role in the cutting-edge research on 'localised energy reflexion fields', known commonly as **L.E.R.F.** These were the field generators built into suits like the one O.P was now wearing. That was what had produced that coruscating light display around him that time. It was a purely defensive, localised field that would repel any incoming projectile or energy beam. It could also 'repel' the ground, allowing the wearer to, more or less, decrease the force of gravity up to 80%. But Deacon had shown that, by focusing that general field into a narrow, single particle beam, it could be used to break the chemical and physical bonds that more or less held objects together.

Deacon envisaged many productive applications for the new tech, from mining, high-way construction, to demolition. Of course it could also be used as a weapon. And once Deacon had realised that his funding was, indirectly, coming from an armaments manufacturer, he lost interest. In fact he falsified all his documentation and research findings to give the impression that his technology did not work. But just because he had abandoned the development of his ideas, this did not stop others from continuing it, despite his attempts to discredit his own previous findings and work. What he most feared had come to pass. Industrial espionage. His main work had already been stolen and, despite his convincing discreditation of his own ideas, others were pushing on with his work.

The public talk had been that the research had been abandoned as 'unfeasible' and 'unlikely to yield a return to investors'. However within the intelligence agency community there was speculation that the research was continuing, 'underground' so to speak. And if this was the case, it would raise a great many questions. Very sinister questions.

For under galactic law, no private corporation was allowed to engage in offensive weapons technology research without the full involvement of the Government. And the sort of thing Deacon had been rumored to have been working on was definitely in the category of 'offensive, large-scale weapon'.

Reading further, it became clear to Destin that no-one really knew what he had been working on. Just that it could change the face of warfare as they knew it. It seemed his bosses' main concern was that someone else seemed to be interested in finding this fellow. People he certainly wouldn't want to find him. And certainly people that the Government wouldn't want to lose him to. People no-one would want to fall into the hands of, to be quite clear. Nasty people. The sort of people who gave sentient life a bad name!

Officially Deacon had been 'discharged' from his job on 'medical grounds'. It seems he was regarded as a 'loner' who would not 'fit in' with the 'team ethos' at 'Unicom'. Reading between the lines, and the notes added by Divisional Psych Ops, it was clear that Deacon had had a lot of 'interpersonal' issues. Mobbing. Workplace victimisation. Bullying. He just wasn't a 'team player'. He would not 'go along to get along'. He had stepped on too many very important 'toes', asking questions that no-one wanted to be

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asked. And worse. Not accepting their, at first subtle, hints to *stop* asking questions. Sensitive questions. Questions of ethics. Questions of legality.

In the end his work, which for a guy like Deacon was his life, had become pretty unbearable. He had had a nervous breakdown. He had been sent to one of 'Unicom's' own 'clinics' for 'treatment', but had proven 'intractable'. He had sensed that if he had continued there, he would have had two choices. Either to become a 'team player' and just do whatever everyone else was doing at work, simply go along to get along, as they put it. Or risk losing his freedom. Of course they would not imprison him openly. They would simply just find excuses to prolong his 'treatment' at the company 'clinic'. He would be in a prison, without ever having had a trial!

Deacon had quietly quit his job about 6 years ago. Of course he was reminded by Unicom's legal 'sharks' of the massive 'penalties' he would suffer should he breach the strict 'gag' clauses in his termination agreement. These prevented him from speaking to anyone about his work at 'Unicom'. In fact speaking to anyone about anything evenly remotely related to the company.

And then, it seems, he had more or less vanished. In fact it was only a day ago that he had been located by one of the most elite intelligence agencies in the galactic empire. An agency so secret that those working for it did not even know they were working for it. The people who more or less ran the agency were equally unaware of what agency they were running. For all intensive purposes there was no agency. Just a set of unconnected agents operating more or less independently of each other.

The fear was that if they could find him, then others might find him too. It would only be a question of time. So they had a real sense of urgency. Otherwise they would never have diverted Commander Destin from his important mission of delivering the proto-Emperor.

Commander Destin just happened to be in the 'neighborhood', so to speak, and would be able to get there before any other imperial operative would. And more importantly, before any 'bad guys' could. His directive was to 'evacuate' Luc Deacon, 'by force if necessary', post haste, and then to rendezvous with his old colleague Captain Meerings, docking with the destroyer which would bring them all back to Operational HQ.

This fact reinforced Destin's suspicions that something really 'big' was on. 'Why dock with a destroyer when his own ship was quite capable of the trip. Except that the destroyer was just bristling with offensive and defensive weapons.' Destin reflected on the implications. 'Was there trouble in the Imperium? Maybe even war afoot? After thousands of years of peace and harmony. Could it be? Who could be such a threat that his passengers might require the defenses of a destroyer?' 'At least', he thought to himself, 'if there were going to be an attack, they would be in the very best of hands'. While he and Captain Meerings might 'bust each other's chops', just for fun, when it came to the line of business they were both in, they had nothing but the greatest respect for each other. They had saved each other's lives numerous times.

Just then Destin's 'train of thought' was interrupted by a broadcast on the 'open' channel required for communications with local authorities. It was a customs vessel of Doonsly, the planet where Luc Deacon was, unknowingly as yet, awaiting a 'sky-hook', as it was known in the fleet.

Destin engaged a signal which automatically advised any customs or local officials that this ship was covered by the 'diplomatic immunity' provisions of the galactic treaty of 25 A.O (After Optimisation). This general 'blanket' provision was often used by intelligence agency operatives who were not keen to advertise who and what they were, let alone on allowing any nosy foreign bureaucrats to go snooping around their ships.

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Destin was not required, under the provisions of that treaty, to make any changes to his flight plan. However the customs officers seemed to be new to their jobs, and unsure of how to deal with the situation. So while they argued the matter among themselves, and sought for advice from their local authorities, Destin continued past them. By the time they realised this they decided it was, after all, probably a good thing. After all, if it was going to be someone's problem, this breaking with the treaty protocols, then better it be 'someone else's problem'!

They were, after all, career bureaucrats!

Chapter Twelve: His light still burns brightly

It was years ago that Deacon had begun working at Unicom. He had proven himself a very gifted and talented software designer. But after winning every award available, he had become dissatisfied. It was like he had achieved everything that was to be achieved in his line of work. He had more money than he knew what to do with. So he had then begun his search for a new outlet for his creative genius. At the same time Unicom 'head hunters' had been sent out on a very secret mission. They were to recruit the brightest and most promising scientists and researchers connected with a very 'hush-hush' project they were developing. In fact the head hunters could tell their prospective recruits very little about the work that would await them at Unicom.

What they could tell them was that they would earn more than any of their peers, and be allowed to work on the most cutting edge projects they could imagine. The money appealed to those who sought status. But the real appeal for most of the recruits was the prospect of working within Unicom. For that meant almost unlimited access to resources. No other organisation in the Galaxy offered their researchers so much freedom.

Working at Unicom had many 'perks' of course. It had a particular 'cache'. When someone dropped a quiet hint that they worked for Unicom, people suddenly became very quiet and attentive to the speaker. Unicom was one of the galaxy's largest business empires. It was a huge holding-company. It was veiled in secrecy, which meant it attracted all sorts of speculation and was shrouded in myths and legends.

Because of their extremely secretive employment contracts, even the fact that such 'gag' clauses existed could only be deduced. It was a distinct 'no-no' to even allude to the gag clauses themselves. No-one talked about what they were doing at Unicom. And no-one ever dared even suggest, in public, that the reason they did not talk was because they were not free to. Unicom had a 'gang' of very nasty lawyers just waiting to sink their teeth into any employee who dared share even the most harmless details about their work, or such 'gag clauses', at Unicom.

It was so strict, that you had to sign a 'gag-clause' even before any prospective discussion about working at Unicom, let alone before being granted an actual job interview.

However Unicom employees were allowed, some might even say encouraged, to rave on and on to their hearts content about the working conditions. This was to make sure that everyone wanted to work for Unicom. The head-hunters, those recruiters specialising in stealing the best talent from other companies, and recruiting the most promising students, often had only to mention that Unicom might be interested in employing them, and the prospective employee would be falling over themselves to have a shot at a position with them.

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So when Deacon was approached by a young recruiter from the head-hunting agency 'Select', he could find little reason to resist. He was more or less at a 'loose end'. What could he possibly have to lose? He had of course heard all the stories about Unicom. If there was anywhere where someone like him could find an exciting new project to work on, it would be Unicom.

At first all went well. Sure he didn't have the best social skills, but that just raised his status in the eyes of many of his 'non-technical' work colleagues. It was just what they would expect of a true genius. He fit the profile perfectly. And so his almost abrasive personality and apparent lack of empathy for 'mere-mortals' and their 'feelings' worked in his favor for the most part. No-one was offended to be, how shall we put it, 'offended by a genius'. It was almost considered a, shall we say, privilege. People would proudly announce to friends, during conversations at the water cooler, or in the staff lounge that 'I was just burnt by the light', and everyone would understand that he meant that they had just had a run-in with Deacon, their very own genius.

What no-one had realised was that Deacon was a man in possession of the highest ideals, ethics, and values. Only due to his abrasive personality, his lack of patience with 'lesser mortals', and other 'social defects', he came off, to the less enlightened, more like a socio-path than a prophet. This was one of the things Unicom liked to encourage. They wanted creative talent that was focused on solving technical problems, with no distractions, let alone concerns for ethics. Deacon had appeared to fit the bill. The more abrasive he appeared, the more sociopathic he was taken for. The more perfect a fit he seemed to represent to the Unicom 'way of doing business'.

But then slowly he began worrying his supervisors with inopportune, disquieting, discomforting questions regarding, 'down-stream consequences' and 'negative externalities'. It had gone so far that one day the word 'ethics' was actually uttered within the walls of a Unicom research facility. Oh, of course they had 'ethics' boards and such. But they were all for show. They were pure public relations exercises. In reality, Unicom would push forward any research proposal if it was deemed in the interests of the profitability of a project, and thus in the interests of Unicom shareholders.

It was the way he said the word that threw everyone. There was no hint of sarcasm or irony in it. Deacon appeared genuinely concerned about the 'ethics' of a recent module of the new project he had been allocated to. It had alarmed management so badly that they had immediately re-assigned him to a new project. A harmless one where they could keep an eye on him, monitoring him for any further signs of 'principles'.

What had finally shocked them beyond all reason was the fact that Deacon had continued to maintain an interest in the 'ethics' of his previous assignment. He had in fact sent formal written notices to the Board of Directors, following the company's own operations manual. Of course they never got the notices. They were screened from such nuisances by all the 'filters' that prevented bad or even disquieting news from reaching the senior levels of management. These letters of course came back to Deacon's immediate supervisors. It would be their responsibility to 'deal' with Deacon's absurdly naive 'principles'.

At first Deacon thought the whole thing must have been a misunderstanding. Surely the company would be interested in the potential risks and dangers of their projects? He was in no way prepared for their response.

He was 'directed' to appear at a Unicom medical clinic for a 'general medical check-up'. At first he in no way connected these things. He assumed it was just a routine check-up. In fact when he read the letter again more carefully he saw that it clearly was a 'routine health check-up required of all Unicom employees'.

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Only, when he arrived at the clinic the next day, he was caught completely surprised and unprepared for what awaited him. It was in fact a psychological assessment and it was being carried out by Unicom's own 'DSM-slingers' a.k.a psychiatrists.

The first thing Deacon noticed was that the doctor assigned to him had the originals of the letters he had sent to the Board of Directors, after his own management had ignored his requests to discuss the matters. Deacon became disquieted at this. They were after all, according to the Company's own procedures manual, highly confidential letters. No-one but the board of directors had a right to see them. He tried not to show his agitation. However he couldn't help but feel a simmering anger at this betrayal of confidence. He felt a rising wave of hostility growing within himself. 'How dare they treat me like this', he thought to himself.

The doctor then began to speak. 'You know, Mr Deacon, it is Unicom's experience that most 'whistle-blowers' are really simply attention seekers with a loose grasp on reality. They attempt to compensate for their insecurities and failures through some self-defined 'heroic' acts, such as, well, reporting on some imagined dangers, to the media for example.' Then waving the 'confidential' correspondence in the air, he continued. 'And this sort of thing, well, I mean, Mr Deacon', he said in the most condescending manner Deacon had ever heard, 'well, what can I say. It, well, I mean, you'll have to admit, it does sound a little mad, doesn't it? Everyone knows we have the strictest ethical guidelines in the galaxy. If your superiors felt they had dealt with your 'grievances' and 'concerns', then surely they had been dealt with. And so what would you call it when someone goes around making up problems where there are no problems? I mean, no one else seems to see any problem. So why this? I mean, there must be, what, 200 researchers working on that project, and how many have voiced even the slightest concerns? The answer is none, Mr Deacon.'

The 'Doctor' pulled up a chair, so that he was now sitting opposite Deacon, at eye level. He adopted what he probably imagined was a 'caring' tone. He had to imagine how a person who did actually care about others might sound. He himself was a pure sociopath. That had ensured his rise in the company. 'Now Unicom cares about its employees. And that's why we're going to send you on a little 'medical' leave to one of our best clinics. It's equipped to handle cases such as yours. You will be taken care of, and once we have resolved the issue you will be able to return to work. I'm sure you'll agree that this would be best for all concerned. Don't worry, everything will be taken care of. We have already removed all your things from your work-station, and you'll be able to go directly from here to the clinic. In fact I think someone is here to pick you up right now', he added, smiling smugly.

Deacon had felt a wave of panic rising within him. He had heard 'suburban myths' about 'whistle-blowers' being more or less imprisoned in mental institutions. In some of the myths it was government employees who had found out something they shouldn't have, and had tried to warn the public. In others it was ex-employees of big corporations who had threatened to blow the whistle on corrupt contract dealings with the government, or dangerous products. And now it appeared to be happening to him.

He had to think quickly. 'Ah, well, actually, thing is, if it is like you say, and I am in need of medical treatment, and, well, no criticism intended, but I think I'd rather get it down at 'Beaver Springs'. Not to brag about it, but I have no money problems. I have several patents which bring me a large private income. And if I'm going to need psychiatric treatment, well, I'd rather have it luxury. I'm sure Unicom's clinic is very nice. But, well, I'm sure you...'

'Yes, yes, yes, of course I understand', the Doctor broke in, almost relieved that Deacon was apparently offering no resistance to the idea of being mentally ill, and needing treatment. Deacon could see the envy welling up in the Doctor's eyes. The Beaver

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Springs facility was famous for its luxury, and for the equally famous list of its clients, pop stars, film stars, the rich and famous from around the world. The Doctor was tempted to ask Deacon to 'put a good word in for him' at the clinic, but restrained himself. Instead he promptly offered, in a tone he imagined was friendly, warm, caring, and confidence inspiring, 'I'll have your referral written up and sent on down there then' he added, with a smile as fake as his wife's, and his girlfriend's, orgasms.

Then, suddenly cautious, after Deacon's declarations of his personal wealth, and not wanting to risk any ill-will from anyone who could afford the best legal counsel in the Galaxy, he added 'Oh, and sorry about the violation of your privacy, Mr Deacon. If I had had anything to do with this I would have refused. But, well, you understand, these things are out of my hands. Like you, I have signed particular agreements with Unicom. And none of us is going to risk biting the hand that feeds, now, eh, Mr Deacon?' With this last attempt at familiarity and jocularly, the Doctor put on an unconvincingly fake mask of congeniality.

It was hard to fake an emotion, a feeling, which was completely alien to you. Sociopaths had to train themselves carefully to give off all the micro-cues and gestures that came naturally to non-sociopaths. This usually worked on the mass media, where everything could be choreographed. But once they were forced to 'ad-lib', their masks wore thin, they began acting 'out of character', and tripped over their own attempts to appear 'natural'. They often revealed themselves by what they tried to conceal about themselves. But they were too arrogant to realise. They imagined that their 'acts' were successful. They never realised that any intelligent, natural, compassionate person could see right through them.

So it came to pass that Deacon was allowed to check himself into the Beaver Springs facility. Had it been his imagination, or had he been followed, just to make sure he actually did what he had 'agreed' to do?

At first it was merely a move to get Unicom off his back. But once there he found himself sinking into a quite deep depression. Up until this incident he had been blissfully unaware of the 'real' world. He had lived his life more or less 'cocooned' by his material success. He had been able to live independent of society. His experience of others was limited to situations in which he had total control. He had never been a victim of the nastier aspects of human nature. He had always been safe and apart from people. And so he had been able to nurture a quite naive notion of human nature. He had believed that most people were 'good', for want of a more sophisticated expression. He would have made a convincing Marxist propagandist. He certainly shared their illusions of 'the noble savage'.

But now his blissful ignorance had been shattered. The very ground beneath his feet suddenly felt much less secure than it used to. All his orientations points seemed to have shifted. His moral compass felt like someone was passing magnets over it, so that it began spinning erratically. He was very sensitive by nature, and the shock of these recent events really hit him hard. He had lost faith in humanity. He had lost all sense of purpose and direction. He found himself, like an ancient mariner stuck in the 'horse latitudes'. He was marooned without an objective. His psycho-cybernetic systems having no goals, and ceased moving, and thus collapsed into himself. He didn't realise it at first, but he was undergoing a nervous breakdown. And so it came to pass that he never left the room he checked into. And that was years ago.

There was no reason to. He had no motivation to go back out into the world again. He felt safe here, in his room. The nurses were very kind. The food was excellent. He had a lovely view of the carefully manicured gardens, all the way down to the tree line, and the walls that they kept hidden from inmates, and casual passers-by. The costs of this luxurious clinic meant nothing to him. Money meant nothing to him. Just a bunch of

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numbers. Mostly zeros. Lots and lots of zero's after a 9. That was a good metaphor for his interest in money. He had zero interest in money. The staff here had grown used to him. And management realised a 'cash cow' when they saw one. He never asked about what they were billing him, or what for. Most of the treatments he paid for were never carried out. And he preferred it that way. All he wanted was to be left in peace. And soon the management realised this, and honored his wishes. Who were they to argue, when he was paying? So they mostly left him to his own devices. That meant to his 'hobbies'.

He was, for all intensive purposes, a 'broken' man. Often he would spend hours just staring blankly out of his window. Like a Zen Buddhist, meditating upon life, and human nature. The view was in fact glorious. A sumptuous garden. But Deacon didn't see it. Mostly he saw nothing. But now and then inspiration would literally 'grab' him and he would go back to his table, which was now more or less equipped as a work-station, to work on some new idea. The people who worked at the clinic had no idea that the occasional deliveries that came to Deacon's room were highly specialised Nano-technology work-tools, each worth more than any of them would ever earn in their lifetimes.

In fact most people at the clinic believed he had lost his mind, and was merely imagining to be working on some new idea. But no-one felt unkindly towards him. He was very well-liked. In fact one nurse in particular had become very fond of him. Nurse Brooks. She had had her work schedule arranged to ensure that she would be working in his section of the clinic. She would be the one to do any routine testing, provide any routine nursing care, and she even managed to take her meals at the same time as him, in the wing dining hall. Well it was actually more like an expensive restaurant. The staff usually ate in their own staff canteen. However some nursing staff were required to be present in the client dining hall in case of any medical emergencies. And so Nurse Brooks had managed to secure this nice little 'perk' for herself. For most Nurses it was all about the gourmet cuisine. However Nurse Brooks had a motive few would ever have guessed at. She enjoyed being close to Deacon. She worried about him. And if she was to be honest with herself, well, her interest was much more than purely professional. In fact she found herself feeling very motherly towards him. And then those motherly affections grew into something else. Something more romantic.

Chapter Thirteen: It's a cat to the rescue

The receptionist was visibly disquieted by the appearance of Destin, in full uniform, and O.P, in his 'body armor'. Then there was the strange animal, the one in the 'armor' was holding. The other boy with them, however, looked strangely out of place, in the sense of appearing quite, well, 'normal'.

She had immediately placed her foot on the 'silent' alarm, alerting security to a potential problem. However as she removed her foot from the alarm she received a call from the clinic's Director directing her to give her full and unquestioning assistance to a certain 'Imperial Commander Destin'. And so when some discreetly attired security personnel appeared, she gave them an equally discrete 'all clear' signal, and so they stood back and merely watched from a 'discrete' distance.

Destin observed all this 'discrete' behavior discretely. He noted the change in the receptionist's general body posture and micro-gestures after the phone call. She smiled very pleasantly now. Good afternoon. How may I help you?

'I am Imperial Commander Destin. Here to pick-up a long term client of yours whose presence is required by the Emperor.'

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This reference to the Emperor impressed the receptionist, as Destin had intended it to. He wanted to get Deacon and get out of there as quickly as he could. His intuition was telling him that all the recent events were somehow linked, and that any delay could prove catastrophic.

'I will have Nurse Brooks take you to him right now', she offered by way of reply, 'She's just come in. That's her now.'

They all turned in the direction of the receptionist's gaze, to see a pretty nurse entering the room. She was walking towards them. She was wondering why all these strange people were looking at her. She had to sign in for duty at reception.

As she signed in the receptionist addressed her. 'Ah, Nurse Brooks, these...gentlemen...are here to see Mr Deacon. I have just had a call from Director Styre informing us to give our full co-operation to any request from Commander Destin here. Would you mind taking them to him now? As I understand it, it is a matter of some urgency.'

'Well of course. Right this way, gentlemen'. She gave the group a quizzical look, her gaze coming to rest finally on the cat. Noting her puzzled look, Renshaw offered 'It's a cat'.

'Oh, is it?' replied Nurse Brooks, not any the wiser for the volunteered explanation, now turning to take a curious glance at Destin, now turning to have a quick look at Renshaw, smiling, as she lead them to Deacon's room. She knocked on the door and waited for Deacon to invite her in. 'It's Nurse Brooks, Mr Deacon', she called through the door, 'with some special visitors for you. I'm sure you will want to meet them.'

There was no answer. The light on the door indicated that he was 'in'. Destin gave Nurse Brooks a look indicating that she should let them in. She would have preferred not to 'surprise' Mr Deacon, however she got the distinct feeling that it would be in his best interests to speed things up. And so she opened the door.

Nurse Brooks quietly entered the room. Destin followed impatiently, keen to get out of there with Deacon as fast as possible. More and more he was getting a feeling that he was just a few steps ahead of something. Thanks to Renshaw he had been mentally prepared for trouble even before the directive from his operations group. That had given him the edge on those assassins. It had made all the difference. How they had known where to look for him and O.P was anyone's guess. But it suggested there was a 'mole' in the organisation. Someone leaking top-secret information. For money? For love?

Could it possibly be that some faction had developed inside the government that favored one of the other Makras clones? It was possible. And if there was a mole, then there was a good chance that Destin was not the only person who knew where to find Deacon. And the simple fact that he was looking for him, that the most secret intelligence agency in the galaxy wanted something from him, well, that would automatically make him of immense interest to anyone not aligned with the current government. Without knowing who Deacon was, or why the Emperor wanted him so badly, they would sense the chance to make a profit from the situation.

If any private espionage agencies had gotten wind of something this big, the simple fact of the sense of urgency with which Destin had been dispatched would have set off bells among the galaxies bounty hunters and privateers that something was up. They would want to know what. They would sense a chance at making their names, and their fortunes.

With all these thoughts fleeting across Destin's mind, he was growing more and more impatient. He looked over Nurse Brook's shoulder to see what was holding them up. She opened the door, sensing his urgency, and they all entered without hesitating.

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It was a reasonably large room. It was very quietly but clearly expensively decorated. Thick natural fiber carpets. Solid, comfortable furniture. A large bay window with a glorious view of the landscaped gardens. Even in his agitated mind Destin could not help but be affected by its lushness and perfect proportions. It looked damned expensive, this place.

Deacon was seated in a very comfortable looking sofa chair, staring blankly out the window. He did not appear to be enjoying the view. He did not appear to be even aware of the lovely view. He didn't seem to be 'here' at all. Where he was, well, who could say? He paid them as little notice as he did the view. Then Nurse Brooks gently placed her hand on his shoulder, leaned down, and spoke softly in his ear. 'Mr Deacon, you have some visitors. See?', she cooed, indicating the group behind him.

He seemed to have been in his own little world, but her words brought him back to the here and now, and them. At first he looked confused, trying to digest the information. 'Visitors?' he thought to himself. The concept was a little strange to him. He hadn't had any 'visitors', not ever, at least none that he could remember. In fact he felt slightly disquieted at the idea. What in fact were visitors, anyway? But he wasn't at all curious. He was not at all interested in these new facts. They just existed, like the garden outside. Deacon felt nothing in relation to them. They didn't motivate him to want to respond or interact in any way.

Just then the cat jumped out of Renshaw's arms, and sauntered in a most familiar way directly over to Deacon. It rubbed itself along his legs, purring deeply and contentedly. Deacon had never seen such a creature. It seemed very friendly. He was however startled a little when the lovely furry ball of affection butted its head in between his arm and stomach, and jumped up into his lap, nuzzling his hand and rubbing its head up against his chest, standing up on two legs and rubbing its soft furred face against his cheek. The cat's purring sounded magnificently loud and deep this close to his ears. So soothing. So calming. So... Yes, actual feelings. He felt something.

O.P and Renshaw felt a little confused and a bit worried, but Destin motioned for them to be patient and wait. He had some idea that the cat knew what it was about. Sort of 'pet therapy'.

Then for the first time, Deacon seemed to acknowledge their existence in the room. He looked down at the cat again. He began to brighten up. He was stroking the cat under the chin and behind the ears, still now mostly lost in thought, but apparently becoming more and more lucid with each passing moment.

'It's a cat', Renshaw offered. The others turned to him with 'shooshing' looks, which he returned with a shrugging of his shoulders, as if to say 'well, what?'

'It's-a-cat'. Deacon spoke the three words as if they were three syllables of the one word. 'I like It's-a-cat'. Yes. Lovely. Very nice. You are welcome Its-a-cat'. He said this almost formally. Then turning to the others, and for the first time acknowledging their presence, he said, again in that strangely formal way, 'I think Its-a-cat likes me'.

They all nodded cheerfully in agreement, the tension in the room suddenly breaking. O.P hadn't been aware of just how tense the atmosphere in the room had been until this moment of relaxation.

Just then Deacon went to stroke the cat on the tummy. Destin had himself attempted that a few days before, and had earned himself quite a few nasty scratches for his effort. They stung even now at the mere recollection of the cat's sudden violent reaction.

'It definitely did not enjoy having it's tummy rubbed', Destined thought with a little panic. And so, wanting to avert a small catastrophe, just at the moment when it seemed

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Deacon was finally coming back to himself, he was about to leap forward, a cry of 'no, don't...' in his throat. But before he could utter the cry he was stunned into silence at the sight of the cat thoroughly enjoying Deacon's tickling of its belly. Destin felt a wave of relief flood through his body.

'It's-a-cat' likes to have its belly rubbed, doesn't its-a-cat', Deacon crooned.

It was love at first sight. Everyone could see that. Even Nurse Brooks was surprised. 'We'll have to get some more of these, ah, what do you call them, cats?', she suggested optimistically, clearly pleased with the transformation that had taken place in Deacon, all thanks to this furry creature.

Chapter Fourteen: Another close call and quick get-away

But before anyone had a chance to respond they were all startled by a commotion out in the hall. 'Wait here', Destin said in a tone of command. He went out into the hall and they heard his footsteps down the corridor. Then suddenly they heard him running, and were ready for some surprise as he burst in through the door, locking it shut behind him.

'Quick, we've got to get out of here'. He spoke in a low, deep, clear, quiet voice. He was clearly extremely worried. Someone or something out there had knocked the normally calm Destin off balance, and out of his normal state of equanimity.

Then the most unexpected thing occurred. Deacon looked like a soul-less puppet whose soul had suddenly re-entered it. He came to life. There was no other way to describe the transformation. His body jerked like an electric current had passed through it. His eyes lit up. Color returned to his face, which had been almost chalk white. While the others were at a loss for ideas, Deacon had suddenly become completely lucid. In a voice surprisingly authoritative voice, almost modeled on Destin's soft, low, deep tone, he was suddenly taking charge of the situation. 'Quick, we can all hide here', he said, gesturing to the wall of his room.

At first everyone thought he was, as he at first had appeared to be, completely nuts. Bonkers. Ga-ga. He seemed to have lost the plot. Unless there was a secret passage hidden in the wall, they could not see what Deacon could possibly mean.

Renshaw and O.P instinctively ran to the wall, looking for anything that might be a 'lever' to open some secret door, like you always see in the movies and read about in mystery novels and adventure books.

But then Destin and Nurse Brooks understood Deacon's plan. But as O.P and Renshaw came back to the group, re-appearing and exclaiming, 'we can't find anything', they could make no sense of the looks of satisfaction on the faces of Destin and Nurse Brooks. These looks changed from confused incomprehension to confident understanding the moment Destin and Nurse Brooks, supporting Deacon between them, moved toward the wall and disappeared. With a flash of realisation O.P and Renshaw quickly followed and joined them against the wall.

Deacon had installed a one-way cloaking device. The way the device worked was to somehow project an image of the back wall between you and the wall. Anyone on the other side of the projection would simply assume they were looking at the back wall.

And just in time, too. For just as Deacon, 'Its-a-cat' cradled protectively in his arms, indicated for them to keep quiet, the door burst open, and in stormed two very mean and nasty looking characters, dressed in some sort of space-combat outfits, though nothing like Destin's or O.P's. They were armed and clearly dangerous.

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Destin had to master his instinctive impulse to fight, remembering that as long as they were not discovered they were safe. He had to keep remembering that they couldn't see him. He would have loved to have a go at them, but he could not risk endangering the others.

Their pursuers look puzzled, and came up very close to the wall, almost touching them. Destin's arm flinched slightly, as he controlled his impulse to go for his weapon. As he watched, helpless to act, the thought occurred to him that he should have activated O.P's 'shield'. He would have done so now, but he was unsure if it would interfere with whatever it was that Deacon had built, and which had saved them this far.

Just then Destin heard a space-ship taking off nearby. Then he realised why it had caught his attention. It was the distinct sound signature of his space-ship. He would have recognised it anywhere. 'Who was stealing his ship?' he thought. At first he was angry, but then he considered the advantage. The dangerous visitors had clearly heard the sound too. Steps could then be heard running back down the hall towards them. As the steps reached their room a distressed voice called out, with a great sense of urgency. 'It's their ship. Get a move on or they'll get away.' At this the two armed intruders gave the room one more quick look-over, and ran out and down the hall.

A few moments later they heard another ship take-off, apparently followed by some local police who had been alerted by security after the violent intrusion. The intruders had 'taken out' a number of guards without raising a sweat, and seeing this, the remaining guards had taken up observation positions and were reporting back to the local police. They didn't have the sort of training to deal with these intruders. Few people did. Sometimes bravery would just mean a stupid waste of life. And this was one of those times.

Chapter Fifteen: Meerings saves Destin's ass, *again*

Meerings had arrived just moments after the intruders had entered the building. Quickly evaluating the situation based on years of active duty, he called back to his ship, ordering a remote activation of Destin's ship. One of his lieutenants would remotely pilot Destin's ship as a decoy, to draw away the threat. They would take off after the ship that it was logical for them to assume Deacon was on. That was Meerings' reasoning. His plan had worked.

Meerings was feeling a bit cocky. He couldn't wait to 'save' Destin, and really 'rub it in'. He would be enjoying this for months to come. He wouldn't let Destin live it down. But first to actually 'save' him. 'Now where was the 'old man'?', he thought to himself.

He'd waited until the police had left in pursuit of the intruders, before introducing himself to the police on the scene. He took out his weapon and armed it, releasing the 'safety'. He then cautiously entered the reception, then the hall, and then waited outside Deacon's room. Hearing nothing, he carefully and quietly slinked into the room, keeping his back against the wall, just in case of any further surprises.

Once inside he was as confused as the previous intruders had been. The room was empty. Just a big empty table full of electronics gear. He put the safety back on his weapon, and returned it to his holster.

But then some sixth sense challenged the impressions of his other senses.

Something 'smelled fishy' about this. Where had the old man gotten to?

The only one of the group hiding behind the 'screen' who recognised Meerings was Destin. And Destin, relieved suddenly, felt an inexplicably unprofessional desire to play a little trick on his colleague. He gave Deacon, O.P, and Renshaw a relaxed smile,

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conveying that everything was O.K, and that the man who had just entered with his weapon drawn was no threat.

They all sensed something playful enter into Destin's demeanor. They all relaxed, and felt that some fun was in the air. Destin was clearly enjoying himself, and his playful tone infected the others. O.P, who had never really seen this side of Destin, was the most surprised. Destin knew that he would never live this episode down. Meerings would have 'bragging rights' for years after this. It is not every day you get to save the ass of your commander. So Destin considered he would get his own in while he had the chance.

And so he waited, watching, smiling smugly to himself, as Meerings carefully checked out the room. The others were at least as interested in this new side of Destin, as they were in the man with the weapon. And then just as Meerings turned his back upon them, the perfect idea came to Destin.

He had, as a child, developed an incredible knack for 'throwing his voice'. He had also had a talent for impersonating famous and infamous people, even some animals.

'Don't step on me', a tiny, tinny little voice implored. It appeared to come from the ground just next to Deacon's right foot, which he was about to put down on the carpet. He pulled himself short, stepping back, incredulous. For a moment he wondered if it were possible that Destin had been 'shrunk', like in those movies. He looked closely at the spot where the tiny voice appeared to be coming from, completely at a loss to explain what was going on.

At this everyone began laughing at the joke. Of course Meerings got the biggest shock of his life when first the laughter, appearing from nowhere, filled the room, and then one by one the group emerged, as if through the solid wall. He had to check himself a few times. He then put his arm gingerly through what appeared to be a solid wall, and he joined in the laughter.

'Ah, old man. Wonder why I bother saving your sorry old ass all the time' Meerings sighed, clearly surprised, but also relieved. He had, for a moment there, considered the possibility that Destin had actually boarded his craft before the remote launch, and was now being pursued by whoever it was that was after Deacon.

'What's this, 'all the time' business? If I recall rightly, I've pulled your sorry carcass out of the fire more times than...'

'O.K. O.K. Enough reminiscing. Any idea who that lot were? And how they come to be here of all places, at this of all times?

'No. Do you by any chance know who's gone off with my ship?'

'Lost your ship have you, old man? Well now. That is going to take a lot of explaining when you get back to HQ, isn't it. Losing your ship, hey? Now I can't remember when the last time a commander lost his ship. Pretty embarrassing I'd say. Can't say I'd like to be in your shoes when we get back to base'. Deacon couldn't help himself. This was one of those few chances you get to see your commander at a loss. He could barely keep a straight face.

There was something about the way Meerings was really laying it on thick, trying to make this as painful an embarrassment as possible for Destin, that made Destin suspicious. He then considered how fortunate it had been that someone might take that exact moment to steal his ship. He gave Meerings a really penetrating stare. And then Meerings couldn't help himself any longer. He broke out in uproarious laughter which became infectious. Soon they were all laughing again. Though only Meerings knew what the punchline was. He decided to let them in on the joke, and relieve his commander's confusion. It was one thing to have a joke at the expense of an old front-

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line buddy. But Deacon was his commander. And there had to be limits to the fun. They were, after all, professionals. And so Meerings decided to finally let Deacon 'off the hook', and let him in on the joke.

The incident seemed to have done Deacon a world of good too. He was a totally different creature from the one they had first met just a few minutes ago. He seemed completely competent and lucid, and when Destin explained that he had personal orders from the Emperor to bring him to him for a private audience, he became very practical, packing up some things he wanted to bring, mostly some electronics and things the others could not make head nor tail of. It appeared that Deacon had been granted a new lease on life. The transformation was stunning and complete.

Just as they were ready to leave, Deacon appeared to have come to some sort of decision about something. Giving the bag to Renshaw, the only one not in uniform, he asked Destin if he could have a few moments alone with Nurse Brooks. Destin and Meerings had no objections, as long as he was quick.

They left the two alone. At first he just looked at her. She looked back. Both felt comfortable in the silence. 'I think I'm going to be all right', he offered. Nurse Brooks could only agree. She had observed the sudden change in him. It was marvelous. Then holding up 'Its-a-cat', who he had once more taken up in his arms, he quipped, almost mischievously, 'I have a new therapist'. And then he added, clearly full of life, full of energy, a new man ...'and looks like I have a new job too! He paused, obviously thinking what to say next, and Nurse Brooks was glad to give him time to think, and formulate his thoughts into words. 'And I was wondering, you know, if, like, when, you know, I come back from my private audience with the Emperor, you know, I, well, you, I mean we...'

At this Nurse Brooks cut him off, placing a warm, soft kiss on his cheek, giving 'Its-a-cat' a little pat, and replying 'Yes, I'd love that. You know where to find me when you are finished with your new adventures! 'Now you two'd best be on your way. Can't leave the emperor waiting now, can we!' she said with a warm, generous, accepting, approving smile. Deacon brightened visibly, and, as if walking on air, he turned and headed off to join the others, feeling very important, valued, and useful. 'Perhaps life might redeem itself after all', he thought to himself with a smile. 'Maybe there is some place where I can do good, where I can fit in, where I can be part of a team again.' For that was what he really needed. Acceptance. Approval. To be productive. To contribute something. To be needed. To be valued. To be, well, yes, he dared own up to the dream, maybe even loved.

Chapter Sixteen: Deacon saves 'It's-a-cat'

Captain Meerings had not 'parked' his space-ship in the way you might expect. He followed Imperial security protocols, initiating an automated series of random, unpredictable man oeuvres, up to 100km from the line cruiser. This made any 'parked' ships appear 'manned'. It meant any explosives or pathogens that might have been placed on board by hostile forces could do no damage to the 'mother' ship. It also stopped personnel 'bitching' about who got the best 'parking space'. After he left the ship he remotely activated the new program, debarked, and watched as his ship moved off by itself out into space. He had never gotten used to these protocols, and always felt a slight twinge of panic and doubt each time he initiated them, and watched his unpiloted craft take off without him. Maybe it was abandonment issues?

By now Commander Destin had figured that Meerings had had something to do with the disappearance of his own craft. He decided to take a chance, and feign confidence, trying to gain the upper hand in this friendly battle of wits. Turning to Meerings, forcing

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his face into a mask of a slightly amused smile, he suggested, 'And my vessel? If I'm right, it is probably on its way, piloted by one of your crew, to a 'space ambush'. I would have done the same.'

'Ah, Commander, I wouldn't doubt it for the worlds', Meerings replied, feeling generous. 'Yes, those bad men who were after you are in for a very nasty surprise very soon. We have quite the ambush ready for them. One of my best men is remotely piloting the ship. Did you think of that too, by chance?'

Meerings was impressed. No, he hadn't considered that option. But no need to let Meerings know that.

Before Meerings had a chance to 'pull any more teeth', and discover that truth, Meerings' ship fell from the sky, hovering 50 or so meters from them. This came as a surprise to Destin, O.P, Renshaw, and 'It's-a-cat'. But not to Meerings. So Destin didn't give Meerings the benefit of showing his own surprise. Meerings vessel then landed in the nearest clear area. Meerings immediately headed towards his craft, indicating to the others to follow him, which they did. They thought something must be up, and didn't waste time with questions. They made their way to the gangway that had opened before them. They got in, and Meerings made the seating arrangements. He insisted everyone put on a space suit.

Destin thought this was being unnecessarily cautious. But he made no comment. Deacon, however, 'reading' Destin's body language, volunteered, 'The suits are a new protocol. We have had a few cases of what we cannot confirm or reject to have been 'tampering' on a number of Imperial fleet vessels. Either that, or the companies responsible for the outfitting contracts have been negligent. The issue is still being investigated. Either incompetence, cost-cutting, or sabotage. Take your pick. Either way, until we've had every ship checked out and can have confidence that none of our fleet mechanics are on someone else's payroll, committing acts of treason and sabotage, well...' Destin and the others understood the precaution. And O.P and Renshaw did not need to be talked into putting on space-suits. They jumped at the chance. This produced an atmosphere of fun that Deacon found infectious, for he seemed to be enjoying himself to.

And so, with everyone 'suited up' and strapped into their seats, and 'It's-a-cat' safe in Deacon's arms, they took off. Again O.P and Renshaw were surprised at the lack of any significant 'G' forces. It felt more like the ground was itself moving, falling away from them, than that they were being propelled away from the ground. Very hard to explain the feeling. So unexpected. So contrary to expectations. So seemingly 'unnatural'. Deacon observed the confused looks on the boy's faces. He was going to explain to them how the *contrapulsion* system worked, but then he stopped himself. How did one explain such a thing? The principles were so counter-intuitive. Sometimes even Deacon himself got confused when trying to explain it all to himself. So he just smiled and left them to their riddle. What was life, after all, but one series of riddles? Imagine how boring it would be if we understood everything', he thought to himself. 'Let there be some mysteries yet!'

'So what's the flight-plan, Captain?', Destin asked with a smirk. This was Meerings' ship, even though he outranked him, as a Commander. That was one convention that had survived the ages.

'We should be rendezvousing with the main line mother ship in about...', Deacon took a moment to get the exact readings from flight computer...'21 minutes', Commander', he answered, enjoying being in 'command' of his old Commander.

Its-a-cat had become a little restless, mostly out of curiosity with this new ship. She leaped out of Deacon's arms as he leaned forward to put her on the floor, heading off to

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explore. There were strange new smells and textures to be experienced. Deacon followed her with his eyes until she disappeared down a narrow corridor. He was a little worried, but didn't want to stand in the way of Its-a-cat's fun. So he let it be. Meerings observed this with a bemused look.

Suddenly this look of bemusement changed to one of alarm, as a number of lights began flashing around the cabin, and a computer-generated 'voice' began repeating 'Warning. Air lock breach. Warning. Air lock breach.'

Deacon hit a series of buttons and the 'voice' became softer, though still insistent, in the background. A controlled sense of urgency in his voice, he directed everyone to 'buckle up'. But then he calmly added, almost apologetic, 'There is no immediate threat. It might just be a fault in the detection system'. He quickly ran through all his flight protocols, seeking to isolate the fault, locate it, and then deal with it.

Then suddenly a new warning broke the calm. 'Warning. Outer hatch deployed...Warning, outer hatch deployed'. Meerings gave Destin a worried look. He was thinking hard. Then suddenly Commander Destin broke the silence. 'We'll have to depressurise the cabin. We can suck the outer hatch shut. It opens inwards. The escaping air will suck it tight.'

Meerings looked at him unblinkingly, his mind racing. 'Got it', he replied. He then looked around to ensure that everyone was buckled up. 'O.K guys, there's going to be a big rush of air pressure in a moment. Like a strong wind. You're all tightly buckled in so you have nothing to worry about. He then engaged a pressure pad and the harnesses on everyone's seats automatically tightened a little uncomfortably. 'It's O.K. Just a safety precaution. You have air in your suits for over an hour. We dock in 25 minutes. Right. Ready?'

But then Deacon expressed the unspoken question that was in everyone else's mind. 'What about Its-a-cat?' It took Meerings' mind a moment to register what they were talking about before he, hoping to allay their fears, tried to sound convincing when he assured them 'Ah, your furry friend will be fine. Probably crawled into some crawl-space. It'll be fine.' He was as unconvinced of that as he sounded. But what else was he to say?

He activated the de-compression sequence, and suddenly anything that was not tied down flew towards the open hatch. Deacon saw Its-a-cat come flying down the corridor towards them. In a moment she would be out the hatch. Without thinking, he hit what he assumed was the emergency release of his harness and was sucked out just forward of Its-a-cat. That was the last everyone saw of him for the next 15 minutes.

Deacon and Destin saw this scene unfold as if in slow motion. Both had reached out to stop Deacon, their words of warning unable to compete with the sudden 'rushing' sound of air, and the sound of blood beating in their own ears. Renshaw and O.P were horrified. Surely they had lost Deacon and Its-a-cat.

For Commander Destin and Captain Meerings it meant the failure of a mission. For Renshaw and O.P it meant the loss of a newly gained friend. Each turned to exchange looks with the other, fearful of speaking, as if even the act of speaking about their fears might make them real.

The computer-generated voice broke this silence, just as the rushing of air lessened, quickly coming to a halt. 'Hatch secured'. All the red flashing lights returned to a calm green. Everyone felt the harnesses on their seats suddenly give a little, returning to their 'normal' settings.

Expecting the worst, no-one dared look another in the face or speak a word as they all quietly unbuckled their harnesses and headed, like a funeral procession, down the

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narrow corridor, which they had, a minute before, seen Deacon and Its-a-cat flying down.

They found Deacon semi-conscious with his legs entwined around some thick electrical cables and hydraulics tubes that had come lose when their covering panels had been sucked off the walls.

There was no sign of Its-a-cat at all. Renshaw and O.P were heart-broken. Destin felt a wave of sadness move over him. But there was no time for that right now. Destin's professional training kicked as he swiftly eased Deacon out of the cables and tubing, unlatching his helmet, as Meerings went for the resuscitation gear. He returned in a moment, placing the oxygen mask over Deacon's mouth, as Destin shook Deacon gently, calling out 'Deacon, are you O.K. Wake up. Looks like you've knocked your head. Deacon. Are you O.K'.

To everyone's relief, Deacon muttered something and slowly half opened his eyes. He was saying something. Everyone leaned in to hear better. 'It's-a-cat, Its-a-cat, Its-a-cat'. He was mumbling it over and over in a half-conscious stupor.

And then almost as if in response, a lump in Deacon's space-suit began moving. Everyone instinctively backed away a little, staring in amazement. The question stuck in their minds, unasked, as they watched in astonishment. And then It's-a-cat's head emerged from just under Deacon's chin, pushing her head up between Deacon and the space-suit. She looked very unimpressed with the situation. A little forlorn. Shaken. Confused. Dazed. But she was alive.

'It's-a-cat', Deacon crooned in delight. 'You're safe.' At this she began licking his face, as the mood suddenly went from tragic to comic. Everyone laughed. Destin actually felt a tear roll down his cheeks. He quickly rubbed it away, glad that everyone was laughing too much to notice. I mean, it just wouldn't do, would it, an Imperial Fleet Commander and member of the Emperor's Guard, crying with joy over a silly little creature like that!

'Ah, I remember what happened now', Deacon explained. 'I managed to grab Its-a-cat. Then somehow I ended up getting my legs around these cables here. Luckily they were hanging out otherwise I...', and he shuddered at the thought of how that sentence might have ended. 'Well, it doesn't bear thinking about. Then I took a deep breath and opened up my helmet and dropped Its-a-cat into the suit. I was barely conscious at the time. It seems I got the helmet back on just before I passed out from a lack of oxygen.'

Once all their emotions had spent themselves, the group returned back to the cockpit, in a spirit thankfully quite different to the one in which they had so somberly, just a minute before, stumbled down the corridor. This time it was more like a samba line in a carnival, with everyone leaning over now and then to give It's-a-cat a stroke under the chin or a rub behind the ears. Deacon was delighted. He couldn't bear thinking what he would have done if he had lost Its-a-cat.

Back in the cockpit Deacon was going over all his flight protocols and safety checks. He was looking for an explanation as to how the outer hatch could possibly have opened up mid-flight. It was just unheard of. Something like that didn't happen by chance.

Meerings noticed Deacon observing him intently. Once he made eye contact Deacon came closer, asking, tentatively 'Would you like me to take a look?'. Now Destin had read Deacon's profile, but Meerings knew nothing about Deacon. And so he was skeptical. But at an encouraging look from Destin, Meerings moved aside and indicated the control surfaces to Deacon saying 'Be my guest'. Meerings gave Destin a questioning look. Destin gestured to indicate 'just wait, you'll see'.

And so Meerings returned his gaze back to Deacon who was apparently accessing all the ships computer files. But he was accessing things Deacon had no idea were there. And

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he wasn't using the interface that Deacon used. He'd gone behind the word prompts and was scanning lines of code that said absolutely nothing to Meerings, but which apparently spoke volumes to Deacon, for he was 'Ah'ing' and 'Yes, I see now', and 'Brilliant', and chuckling to himself and occasionally looking up to the left, and then returning his eyes to the screen of code. And then finally Deacon turned to Meerings and said, a little mischievously, 'Looks like you've got a Trojan horse. You've been hacked. But don't worry, I've de-bugged your system and neutralised the Trojan horse. I've also cleared out a few other viruses, Oh, and I made a few improvements to your firewall.'

Meerings gave Deacon such a bewildered, blank, unfathomable look in return that he turned to Destin. 'Oh, don't look at me', Destin answered in reply to Deacon's look, understanding about as little of Deacon's explanation as Meerings had. Deacon then turned hopefully to O.P and Renshaw. Renshaw looked as clueless as the others, but Deacon sensed a glimmer of understanding in O.P.

'Oh', O.P offered, a little hesitantly, 'I think what he means is that someone broke into your flight computer, and, if I understand correctly', and now he was looking at Deacon, 'they got remote access over this ship'. He waited for Deacon to approve or disapprove, and, seeing no contradiction in Deacon's body language, he continued. 'It seems someone, somewhere out there', he went on, indicating the blackness of space surrounding them, 'remotely opened that external hatch'. 'Oh, and Deacon has fixed the problem', he added quickly, this time more confidently, even triumphantly.

'Good, Good', Deacon applauded O.P enthusiastically. 'Yes, that's more or less it'.

'And so the question remains', Destin thought aloud, 'Is who and why? First King Aitah's Engodith assassins sent to Earth. And the only thing they know how to do is kill. So no guesses as to what their mission was. And now someone manages to gain remote control of an Imperial ship, and tries to kill us all. Now why would King Aitah want O.P dead? What could he possibly hope to gain by killing off one of the Emperor's clones?

Now all eyes were on O.P. 'Someone is trying to kill me?', he reflected. It was not a comforting thought. And it seemed he had become quite dangerous for anyone to simply be around. He felt bad for them. He felt scared for himself. All this was just too overwhelming. It was just too surreal. Just too unreal. And yet there it was. He was apparently important for some reason. Important enough that some people wanted to kill him. Not just wanted to. They were actively trying to. And these people here were trying to protect him, and bring him back in one piece to...' His mind floundered as his thoughts raced ahead, then raced back, and then ahead again, trying to comprehend what all this might mean. But he was at a loss. What did it all mean?

He suddenly remembered something Destin, Uncle Roy, had said. Then it dawned upon him. 'The current Emperor is also a clone of Makras the Optimiser'. Suddenly he didn't feel very individual or unique at all. It was all just so strange. So very strange. Too strange. Surely it was some kind of weird dream.

Renshaw came over and went to put his hand on O.P's shoulder. O.P automatically, instinctively, flinched. Emotionally wounded, Renshaw pulled his hand back, as if from a flame. O.P apologised, but Renshaw didn't need any explanation. After all, for the last few years any time Renshaw's hand had come near to O.P, it was to shove him, punch him, or steal something from him. 'Sorry Renshaw', O.P spluttered awkwardly. 'Ah, it's nothing, you don't have to explain', Renshaw responded, a little feebly.

Its-a-cat felt that O.P needed some emotional comfort right then, and so she glided over to him, purring, and sliding between and around his legs. She then got up on her legs encouraging O.P to pick her up. He held her with her paws on his shoulders. Her soft,

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purring, warmth, was deeply soothing to O.P's spirit. He walked with her over to his chair and sat down.

Destin walked over to Renshaw, putting his hand on his shoulder to comfort him. 'O.P has just had a pretty hard time. Not just lately, but for most of his life. It will just take him some time to adjust to all this. Oh, and, by the way, I never thanked you for saving us back at the house. Really, if you hadn't run all that way from school to warn us, I don't think we would have escaped. There's probably a medal in it for you in it if you care to return with us to Headquarters. But I will understand if all this is just a bit too much to take. And if you like I will arrange for you to be returned back to your home this evening. We can make up some story to tell your parents.'

As soon as Renshaw understood what Destin was saying he looked in the direction of O.P, who was staring out in front of him with a vacant expression, stroking Its-a-cat who rested against his chest, her head and paws on his shoulder. 'I'd say that's up to him', Renshaw said, indicating O.P.

'Oh, I think O.P would quite like you to stay with us. Just give him a moment alone. Oh, yes, and while we are at it, I'll scan you for a fitting for some body armor. How would you like that?' Destin offered, thinking that should be just the thing to cheer him up, and make him feel part of the team.

'Really?', Renshaw flustered, 'You mean you could get me a suit just like O.P's? Wow.' His face lighted with joy at the prospect. Destin could see he had judged rightly. 'But what about your family? Wouldn't they miss you?' Destin hazarded to ask. At this Renshaw darkened, slumped, sort of fell into himself, and thereby appeared much smaller than usual. 'My family? Hah. Now there's a joke. Them miss me? Hah. I should imagine they'll have a party once they realise they are free of me! 'Only there was nothing amusing about Renshaw's demeanor. He wasn't laughing. There was nothing funny about it. 'That's something we don't have to worry about, Mr Commander'. 'Sir', he added, straightening up to measure up to his own notions of how a soldier should appear before his commander.

Destin was touched by this display, by the sentiment and intention it reflected. He reflected how he himself, as part of the Emperor's Clone's program, had been required to make O.P's life hard. But Renshaw had suffered worse, it seems, and for no good reason. He inexplicably felt somehow obliged to try to make up for that. And the armor would be a good start.

He was keen to see how this young man would develop. And there was no reason why, if he proved loyal, he should not join Tim and PRI, as one of O.P's entourage. But then he corrected his thoughts. No, not merely his entourage. His friends. No doubt O.P would be glad to have as many friends as possible in the times to come, and all the challenges that he would surely be facing. And so he sort of made up his mind then and there that Renshaw would accompany O.P in his training and schooling. And if he proved up to it, and desired it, Commander Destin would sponsor him for service with the Imperial Guards.

But there would be time for all that. Right now he had to make sure they all got back to Imperial base safely. He wondered what new surprises were in stall for them. It seemed nothing could be ruled out. And so he determined that he would keep on the highest level of alert, at least for the time being. His mental resolve showed itself immediately in his bearing, as if balloons had suddenly been attached to the top of his chest and the back of his head.

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Chapter Seventeen: Back to school. O.K. The *Imperial Academy*. (School was never quite like *this*)

O.P sat next to Renshaw in the classroom. It was a far cry from all the excitement of their trip here. It was such a long way to come in such a short time. From Earth, to the center of the Imperium, Eulin, the planet which had been the seat of the Emperors Makrus for over 53 generations.

The memories of their days of shared adventure were now bathed in a glamor made all the more appealing through the contrast with these last few months of routine and study. Sociology. Psychology. Social-psychology. All taught in the context of historical events and significant persons. All taught with a view to enlightening eager young minds as to the nature of their realities, and the reality of their natures. They were given honest, 'no punches pulled', insights into human nature, and how human nature has interacted with the environment to produce society, and history. They had been immersed in comparative religious studies, and placed in particular socio-historic-economic contexts, often with the aid of 3-D holographic presentations.

O.P and Renshaw came to understand how all the religions shared the same archetypes and message. The same motives on the part of the elites who constructed the religions, and the masses who participated in them. Both had selfish motives. The masses hoped for the intercession of the gods on their behalf, to protect them, and ensure their prosperity and well-being. The elites sought to control the masses through rules, the compliance with which was more or less guaranteed by threats of 'fates worse than death' for anyone who broke the rules. The rules benefited the masses in some ways, by attempting to promote good habits and deter bad habits. However their main aim was to guarantee the elites power, wealth, and privilege.

The prophets and teachers that religions claimed their authority from often had the noblest of intentions. However every religion was ultimately corrupted by human greed, and the original ethical teachings of their 'prophets' were lost in a sea of meaningless ritual, rites, and dogma.

Makras had noted that the problem with 'religion' and it's 'noble' lies, was that of arrogance. Every founder of every religion had imagined they were the noblest, clever, and inspired person in history. They would tell everyone how to live. They realised that no-one would listen to them, so they pretended to be speaking for some god or other supernatural being. They would claim that some god or angel had spoken to them, and that they were merely relaying their message. This gave their message the 'transferred authority' of that god or angel. And people therefore listened. They claimed that they had found the 'final solution', and that no more seeking of better solutions was necessary. They in fact banned any challenges to their authority, any interrogations of their own solutions. Anyone who questioned their solutions, or worse, offered their own alternative solutions, were demonised.

In this context O.P and Renshaw, and their fellow students, were lead to consider the nature of various 'taboos'. Those behaviors considered 'sinful', in relation to which most people felt a strong emotional repulsion, or sense of guilt. The universal taboos were of a sexual nature. They came to see how the ruling elites wanted an ever increasing population of workers. For it was the workers who produced all the value that the elites consumed. It was the elites who were, by plan, the beneficiaries of taboos. Any form of sexual gratification which did not increase the population of value producers, by producing babies, was defined by them as a taboo. And so masturbation, oral sex, anal sex, and homosexuality were all defined as sinful, taboo acts.

All adolescents in the Empire had to pass studies in all these areas as part of their minimum compulsory education. This included very explicit sexual education modules,

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many of which were studied privately. One such module contained video footage of children their own age masturbating. This was to 'normalise' the practice, and eliminate any sense of shame or guilt that was, by human nature, due to the 'Oedipus complex', associated with it.

In this context they were expected to understand Freud's work in Psycho-analysis. They were to understand that, as infants, they had willed that their father or mother should die. So that they themselves might possess their opposite sex parent as their own sex-objects. At a time when they still had an infantile belief that their wills were magical. That what they wished to happen would automatically happen. That they were omnipotent. Thus at a subconscious level each person grows up with the belief that they had actually killed their father or mother. They carried a sense of guilt and shame around with them for this imagined act from this time, in all matters related to sex. It was sexual desire that lead to them willing the death of their parent. And so all sexual desires, feelings, and actions took on a taint of shame and guilt by association. It was this sense of shame and guilt that the corrupt religions had exploited. The Priests had tapped into this sense of guilt, and offered 'redemption' from it. The price of this redemption would be submission to the church and its priests, and the payment of various tithes and 'sin' taxes.

In order to allow each student to feel comfortable with their own bodies, they were also shown images of genitals covering the entire range of size, shape, and general appearance that different people's genitals had, in both flaccid and sexually aroused condition.

It was also explained to them, in this context, how each person is by nature bi-sexual, and how homosexuality is just one among many forms of 'normal' sexual expression. In fact, before optimisation, it was the ideal, as it never lead to unwanted or irresponsible pregnancies. However it was not this that surprised O.P and Renshaw most, having grown up on earth. What surprised them most was that, among the hundreds of billions of people in the Imperium, at least since 'Optimisation', 53 generations ago, sex had absolutely nothing to do with reproduction and making babies. It was purely for pleasure.

Both O.P and Renshaw needed quite a bit of convincing when it came time for them to undergo their vasectomies. Most boys their age had already undergone this rite of passage at the age of 13, soon after they began ejaculating. Of course they didn't mind the 'sperm harvesting' rites that took place during the month before the vasectomies. What 13 year old boy would not look forward with great pleasure to the prospect of receiving hand-jobs from a lot of beautiful naked young women, being encouraged to 'cum' and produce as much semen as possible? Of course for the duration of that month they were obliged to abstain from masturbation. But that was not hard, as any time they felt the 'urge' they simply made this desire known to the young women, who would soon 'do the job' and 'harvest' the precious semen, with its DNA carrying sperm.

The general concept of 'responsible reproductive management' was quite alien to O.P and Renshaw, having grown up with the cultural mores of earth. On earth anyone could get pregnant, no matter how poor a holistic inheritance they had to offer their not-yet-conceived children. And millions of unwanted babies were either 'aborted' or born to parents who didn't want them, let alone love, cherish, or adore them. And most babies were born to parents who were, and would never be in, a position to care for them appropriately. To be able to offer them the emotional, social, economic, and educational required to ensure they would be able to lead lives worth living.

Most people in the Imperium would be horrified, angry, and confused that such a situation could be tolerated by any culture. Ironically, they would have had the same, emotional reaction to the earthlings' complete lack of reproductive responsibility and

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management, as the earthlings would have had towards the Imperium's universal system of eugenics.

O.P and Renshaw, though they were at that age at which people never really think about their own deaths, also found it quite surprising that anyone who did not want to live could simply go to a special 'euthanasia center' where, after undergoing a few weeks of counseling, they could pick up a 'peaceful pill'. This pill, when taken, would result in the person seeking to end this current life falling into a peaceful sleep, falling unconscious, and then dying. Of course O.P and Renshaw couldn't ever imagine wanting to take advantage of such a service themselves. But they wondered how many of people on earth, their lives a constant battle with disease, illness, pain, suffering, misery, and hopelessness, might opt for such a service.

Renshaw in particular found one thing quite confusing. For he had been enjoying a variety of deliciously 'creamy' shakes, ice-creams, cakes, and puddings in the school cafeteria. . And all those tasty hamburgers and hot-dogs. He couldn't quite believe what he was being taught. There were no farm animals in the entire galaxy? No cows? No cattle? No meat? No milk? Hah? What? It seems that for the past 53 generations since 'Makras the Optimaliser' and his galactic-wide scheme of 'optimalisation' had been successfully implemented, there had been no meat or dairy products. In fact everything that he had so enthusiastically enjoyed was made from soy, other nuts, seaweed, and a variety of plants that had been engineered over the last 53 generations. Many were grown in tanks like algae. 'Like the 'blue-green algae' he used to see floating in the canals and stagnant creeks!', he thought to himself in a state of amazement and wonder.

O.P and Renshaw noted how almost everything relating to 'Makras the Optimaliser' was viewed with awe. He was given credit with having ushered in a new 'golden age'. They had learned how every religion had referred to some vague distant past 'golden age' in which beauty, peace, and harmony reigned. And how each religion had then promised the people that, if they gave the priests all the power and 'the best of the best', then they would be able to bring about a return to that 'golden age'.

In fact it seemed, and the boys both found this quite amusing, that in each age, the priests had promised their gullible followers that the golden age was just around the corner. Whether it would be a new 'heaven on earth', or a new life in some other place, some 'heaven', it was just a matter of having faith, paying your taxes, tithes, and other 'considerations' to the priests, and being patient.

O.P and Renshaw just couldn't imagine how easy the priests had managed to trick everyone. But then they suddenly realised that this was exactly what had been going on on earth for at least the last few thousand years!

From what O.P and Renshaw had seen of the Imperium, if this planet was anything to judge by, Makras the Optimaliser's vision of a more optimal society seemed to have been realised. People appeared quite content, happy, and satisfied with their lives. There was nothing on earth, at least in the two boys' experiences, that might compare with it. And often, when they were just casually talking about earth with each other, they would stop and consider how lucky they were, and how sad it was that all this couldn't be achieved there, on earth. And then they wondered why it hadn't.

Why hadn't the earth been invited to join the Imperium? Why not share all this with them? What possible reason could the Imperial government have for not doing so? But then there would be more lessons, more new ideas to digest, and more of that lovely 'vegan' food to enjoy, and the boys minds would be distracted, at least for now, from that question. That said, every now and again when they talked of earth, they enjoyed a tacit understanding that one day they would see to it that the earth should share in this

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'golden age' too. They would ensure that the Earth joined the Imperium. Or at least adopted its way of living.

Of course any time they came across the subject of Makras the Optimiser, they remembered that fact that O.P was in fact a clone of this great man. O.P was often wondering at Makras' life, and the strange parallels in his own early experiences. But it wasn't until they had gotten deep into their integrated sociology-social-psychology-sociology studies that O.P began suspecting that his childhood had been deliberately engineered to parallel the early childhood experiences of Makras.

That explained the strange 'death' of Tim. The death that was no death. His uncle, that is, Commander Destin, had said that one day O.P might forgive him. But for what? Commander Destin had remained silent when O.P addressed any further questions on the subject. But it was becoming clear to O.P that they had wanted him to 'suffer' the same early experiences as Makras, hoping that as a result he would develop similar character traits, a similar personality, similar 'feelings' not only towards other people, but to life in general.

Later in their studies of genetics, O.P and Renshaw learned how genes did not 'breed true' in many cases. It seemed that the same genotype could produce different phenotypes. In other words the same apparent ingredients could produce a different outcome. Embryology, what happens in the womb while the fetus is developing, played a big role in this. It was why brothers and sisters could be so similar, and yet so different. And why clones often looked different, and behaved differently, even though, genetically, they were exactly the same.

It seemed that many things combined to determine the outcomes. Genes, embryology, parents, school, early experiences, social life, wealth or poverty, and a whole lot of things all combined to produce a person's 'holistic inheritance', and thus determine their health, appearance, character, personality, and quality of life.

What interested Renshaw so much about Makras was that he was a so-called 'late bloomer'. In his early years he had been more or less a 'failure'. It gave Renshaw hope that maybe he, too, might be a 'late-bloomer'. He made it his ambition to study the life of the great Optimiser to learn how he too might find a way to become a great man. At least a good man. A man that people would respect, maybe even admire. One day he was going back to earth to show everyone what he had become. They would be amazed. Even his parents would have no choice but to be proud of him. And with this thought he betrayed the deep lurking feelings of disapproval, rejection, and abandonment that he always had when he thought of his parents. It was not easy to just 'get over it'. But he was determined to somehow make it all good. And anyway, right now things were just great!

In their classes in political economy, they learned about all the types of government that had been tried and tested, and found wanting. Makras had rejected the idea of democracy as absurd. For it was based on pandering to the opinions of the majority. And any intelligent person soon realised that the majority was usually wrong about almost everything. So few people even bothered to inform themselves about issues. And yet under a democratic system they had all had the right to vote on them. With each person's vote being given the same value. One person one vote! The idea was preposterous. It meant that the commonest fool had as much political power, as much a say in the running of government, as the most informed, conscientious, ethical, principled and enlightened sage.

Worse, it had led to all forms of corruption becoming rampant, as politicians sold political influence to the highest paying 'lobbyist'. It lead to huge amounts of resources being wasted on valueless political campaigning. The money for that had to come from somewhere. It came from the lobbyists. They paid for election campaigns in return for

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favorable treatment. For exclusion from regulation. For exemption from laws they didn't like.

Democracy really means the people governing themselves. Self-regulation. And there was an implicit contradiction in this idea that people could govern themselves. For if they could, they wouldn't need government in the first place. Right? And if people were generally good judges of things, well, they wouldn't every need laws, police, fines, or jails. Right? If they could self-regulate, well, they wouldn't need external, government regulation. Right?

Democracy was little more than anarchy. The people ruling themselves. The people making all the decisions for themselves. Each individual doing what they thought best for themselves. Just imagine the consequences. Democracy could at best produce tyranny of the majority over the minority. This was hardly a recipe for justice and sound government.

Is the majority ever going to vote for a politician who tells them the truth? One who will take away freedoms they take for granted, like the right to reproduce themselves? Even the right to kill their not-yet-born children? The right to threaten these children with hell if they don't accept the religious beliefs of their parents? The implicit 'terrorism' of religion, with its threats of fates worse than death for anyone who will not submit to the tyranny of the Priests.

The thing is, people realise they need strong leadership. They need 'parents', even when they are parents themselves. They know that they themselves cannot be trusted to do the right thing. That's why we have government in the first place. But the whole notion of them being allowed to choose that government, and chose the rules, or at least chose the parents, the leaders, who have promised not to be too 'responsible' and 'parenty', well, isn't that like allowing the children to make their own rules? Isn't that like letting the children decide what to eat for dinner every night, and whether they should go to school, do their homework, do their chores, and so on?

Renshaw and O.P found many of the ideas of Makras quite amusing, even though they were not sure if they were supposed to. But deep down they felt that this guy must have had a good sense of humor, to have managed to come through his early life experiences without becoming bitter and twisted.

Of course a foundation module in their education covered the concepts of evolution. It made it clear that there was no 'for' or 'to' in evolution. They learned to recognise the big mistake many people had once made in attributing 'intentions' to the process of evolution. It didn't work like that. They learned how 'function follows form', and not the other way round. Evolution worked on the principle of 'binge and purge' and negative selection. Billions of random forms were produced. Their 'hosts' competed for survival and reproduction. The forms which offered their hosts the most advantages, or at least the fewest dis-advantage, were more likely to be reproduced, as they would promote the ability of that host organism to survive and reproduce.

Random mutations produced new forms. These new forms were 'filtered' out by competition and negative selection. The hosts which inherited forms which were less advantageous than the forms the other host organisms had inherited would become extinct over time, leaving on the most adapted organisms, those with the most advantageous sets of forms. Those forms which offered some benefit, which proved 'functional'. Those forms that the organism could adapt to provide some benefit, in terms of survival, and more importantly, reproduction.

But the most common error in thinking was to attribute some 'purpose' to evolution, as if evolution produced forms in order to serve some pre-determined function. As if form followed function. As if the idea of the function came before the form emerged. As if

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birds had wings in order to fly. As if evolution had decided to make an animal that could fly, and set about evolving one. As if evolution had motives. As if evolution were, well, some sort of sentient being. And in the end you had the process of evolution becoming anthropomorphised, and spoken of in the same way as the ancients spoke of their own gods, who they imagined 'created' them and their world, with their own intentions.

Many organisms had many forms which did not prove functional. If they could survive and reproduce despite this, they continued to reproduce these forms. However as all organisms are in competition with each other for survival, and with their own kind for reproduction, those organisms with more advantageous forms tended to dominate the species, and soon define it. And species with too many non-functional, disadvantageous forms, tended to become extinct, over time.

The problem with understanding evolution, Makras had pointed out, was that at any given moment we only have the 'adapted' and 'functional' forms to observe, the maladapted and dysfunctional forms having mostly become extinct with their host carriers. So we get a false picture of evolution. It appears to design things purposefully, simply as most of the present-day forms we can observe of course survived to exist today, because they proved, over time, to be functional. We don't get a chance to see evolution in practice, as the process occurs over billions of years. We don't get to see the billions of 'misses'. All we have to go by are the 'hits'. The successes. The failures are dead and gone. So we get a false impression, if we base our understanding merely on what we can observe.

These modules on evolution were integrated into modules on 'creative and critical thinking'. They were taught all the common mistakes people made when arriving at conclusions. Mistakes in logic. Faulty assumptions. Missing the implicit assumptions in arguments. Seeking to prove yourself right rather than finding the truth. All the emotional impediments to clear thinking. How our perceived vested interests often prevent us, unconsciously, from not only admitting we are wrong, and accepting compelling arguments, but actually from seeing what is right before our eyes. Oh the list went on and on. And to think that all this time O.P and Renshaw had just taken for granted that thinking was simple and easy!

And when it came to having great ideas, it seems, even in the case of Makras, that it was more a matter of hit and miss, than about native genius or some 'guiding light'. Evolution, Makras had noted, moved forward by 'trial and error', by 'trying and seeing'. 'Binge and purge'. You just tried out ideas, testing them, and seeing which worked and which didn't. You could rarely tell beforehand which ideas would work best. It was a delusion, an arrogance, an unacceptable pride, to imagine that you could predict what would work best. Makras worked heuristically. He challenged every idea. He tested every idea. He 'tried and saw' what worked and what didn't. He was brutally honest. He allowed no denial. He allowed no favoritism. He allowed no personally vested interests to influence his judgments.

All this gave the boys great hopes. For creativity was not dependent on some magical genius. It was a matter of being open-minded and simply trying out new ideas, no matter where they came from, and no matter what the personal, emotional feelings about the matter were. It was a much about overcoming the emotional biases of 'reasoning' as it was about gaining access to, and ordering information in different ways, to see what patterns could be observed in the data.

Oh, and one of Makras' sayings was 'being wrong is the first step to becoming right', and that gave O.P and Renshaw a real boost. For the fact that they were often wrong was not a bad thing. As long as they could move forwards and learn, there was no shame in being wrong. In fact Makras often 'rewarded' his people for being 'wrong', as long as they did not stubbornly remain in denial. For he said that it takes great character to

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admit you were wrong, and to accept the truth. He had said that you are likely to be wrong more often than right, and hence the wise person quickly learns to accept being wrong. Otherwise you cannot grow and move forward. Where there is stubborn denial and protection of vested interests, there can be no true progress', he often reminded his followers. His personal motto was 'People who make no mistakes, make nothing. And people without the character to admit their own flaws, both to themselves and others, cannot be trusted to ever achieve their best, or get the best out of others'.

Makras had always said that principles and institutions should rule, and not people. As Emperor his role was merely to oversee the operations of those principles and institutions, and to allow for changes in them as these became desirable. He had argued, then proven, that such principles, and the institutions which would 'institutionalise' them, (putting them into practice, and regulating their operations, including policing their infringement), could be deduced from what he had called 'the optimal ethics generator'.

Makras had defined 'morality' as that which facilitates harmonious and productive social relations and a peaceful, innovative, creative, productive, satisfying, enduring, quality of life for all members of a society. Various religions had sought these ends through their 'noble' lies. However they had all failed. These 'lies' ultimately were not compelling. The people didn't really believe them. Probably as the behavior of most priests and kings, the people who claimed to speak for the gods, clearly showed that they, the ones professing to have faith, did not believe the 'noble' lies themselves.

Makras had seen that 'ethics' was all about which habits, if nurtured, would facilitate the peace, creativity, satisfaction, and productivity of the individual. He was clear to remind people that society did not exist as such. Only individuals exist. Only individuals experienced anything. He stated clearly that there was no justice in sacrificing the good of an individual for the supposed good of 'the many'. As 'the many' was merely a lot of individuals who conspired together to sacrifice the good of any individual they could isolate as a 'scapegoat', merely to save their own skins, and protect their own narrow interests, their own benefits, power, wealth, and privilege.

History, Makras had taught, had shown that all the past forms of religion and their 'noble' lies had failed, as they were based on lies, and faulty assumptions about human nature and reality. They had never, and would never, produce the optimal experience of life for individuals. They could not produce the optimal set of social interactions and relationships. They always produced, as they appear, in hindsight, to have intended to produce, a system of relations whereby the majority of individuals were more or less enslaved merely to produce value for, and serve the interests of, a minority of 'beneficiaries'. Originally this 'beneficiary class' had been made up of priests and royalty. Later it was extended to a class of 'nobles'.

Makras had studied every religion and philosophy and then, based on an earlier idea for a 'veil of ignorance' developed by an ingenious philosopher name John Rawls, he had come up with the 'optimal dogma', 'the optimal ethic generator'. The principle was simple. You asked each individual, 'what system of principles would you live by if you were sure that you would continue to be randomly new-incarnated as any sentient being in the universe?'

This meant the individual would have to take into consideration the interests of every sentient being in the universe. For in one of their next lives they could end up being it. This tended to motivate people towards veganism, eugenics, greater equality, greater fairness, and a greater interest in protecting the natural environment. People tended to take a holistic and very long term perspective when calculating where their private self-interest lay. They tended to locate it more in the public domain, than in the private. For they would lose any private benefits at the death of their current 'experience engine'.

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However they would inherit all the public good they had contributed. And so people tended to seek a healthy balance between their individual, current, private interests, and their future, collective, public interests.

Of course many people would merely pretend to be acting according to the assumption of 'the optimal ethic generator'. They would enthusiastically encourage everyone else to contribute as much to the public, longer term good, as they could, while secretly focusing on their own selfish, immediate satisfaction. These were the 'freeloaders'. The 'fakers'. The 'free riders'.

And so Makras had worked with the brightest minds of his generation to further develop the idea of hypnosis into a reliable technique for temporarily 'infusing' a belief into a person. In other words, during all discussion of laws, regulations, politics, and anything affecting 'others', people would have to submit to this 'infusion' of 'the optimal ethic generator'. Thus at the time of them considering any important 'social' issue, they would operate from the deep belief, or if you will, assumption, that they would be new-born over and over, randomly, as all the various people and animals whose interests would be affected by the decisions and deliberations they were making. It represented the technical realisation of 'The Optimal Ethics Generator' into an actual electro-chemical device.

It was virtual reality technology. It ensured that everyone contributing to any decision making process that affected others was actively, to the best of their abilities, considering the interests of those others, and seeking an authentic balance between their own interests, and the interests of others. A balance between their own, and others, current interests, and long term future interests.

Thus very quickly veganism became the 'ethic', the 'habit', without the need for any external coercion from the state. Each individual, considered that their recently departed loved ones might now be a cow, or chicken, or pig, and that they themselves, in many many next lives, were likely to end up experiencing the fates of cows, chickens, and pigs, and so on. None considered the cost of the suffering they and their loved ones would endure then, to be worth the pleasure they enjoyed now, from consuming animal products. The costs simply outweighed the benefits. The suffering and misery outweighed the pleasure and satisfaction.

The same principle operated in relation to reproduction. Everyone considered how they could help ensure, this life, that in their billions of next lives, they and their loved ones would be born healthy, sexy, beautiful, and intelligent, by practicing simple principles of eugenics. Thus they willingly sacrificed the right to reproduce themselves this life, for all the benefits, over billions of next lives, to be gained from the responsible, optimal, management of reproduction.

Makras had grown up imagining, like most people, that he possessed 'free' will. However his studies and experiences showed him the error of this. And once he realised the reality of determinism, he also realised, as many prophets and philosophers before him had, the folly of the very idea of pride or shame. For as all our actions, thoughts, desires, feelings, failures, mistakes, successes, achievements, laziness, motivation, efforts, and sacrifices, are all determined, we cannot claim responsibility either way. Thus to imagine ourselves worthy of pride in our achievements, or to consider it legitimate to punish others for their failures, was absurdly unfair and meaningless.

Excessively punishing criminals beyond what was necessary to deter and prevent anti-productive behavior was unjust. Excessively rewarding people for their windfalls of ability, talent, personality, and all the other elements of their holistic inheritance that produced their ultimate success, beyond the reasonable need to motivate, was also unjust.

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Makras understood that the insights he had gained into human nature, and the nature of reality in general, would be difficult for most people to accept. He knew for a fact that the current beneficiaries of the current unjust, sub-optimal system of relations, and the assumptions that produced them, would fight to defend their own privileges, power, wealth, and all the other 'benefits' they enjoyed, at the expense of the majority they parasitically exploited.

And so in the early years he had imposed his rule upon the galaxy in a host of clever, unobtrusive, consensual means, and also through sheer coercion and force. He had dictated that all citizens undergo a re-education program, and submit to the 'infusion' of 'the optimal ethic generator'. In fact few people ever realised they had been so 'infused'. It was done without their informed consent. One of the few times Makras ever condoned the violation of his basic tenet, that of 'informed consent'.

In order to achieve informed consent, you had to first inform people. And that was impossible in many cases, without breaking the basic tenet of informed consent itself. For the people seemed quite hostile to being informed. Human nature was plagued by wishful thinking, denial, and self-serving self-deception.

Thus Makras was clear on one point. No tenet was inviolable. Each situation was unique, and had its unique 'optimal' response. However, as long as all the social actors involved in a decision approached it with good intentions, good will, and acted in good faith, the optimal response could be attained, without risk that the current necessary breach of a fundamental tenet or principle would lead to a corruption of that tenet or principle in general.

So, like all the great leaders before him, Makras 'tricked' the people into becoming informed. Enlightened so to speak. Despite themselves. It was a necessary precondition for informed consent. To first trick people, without their consent, into informing them. Enlightening them. By using the new device. The 'Optimal Ethics Generator'. It was implanted in a chip, in every citizen in the Galaxy.

First people were offered incentives to volunteer to have the chip implanted. They were offered priority service in various government offices, public transport, and a host of private entertainment venues. They were offered a very fast check-in procedure for all international and domestic flights. They were granted cheaper insurance premiums. Many new 'apps' for their social networking sites were developed that required the use of the chips. These offered free, banking and payment systems, free Wi-Fi and even mobile telephone services. Then gradually all government and most private services offered a series of benefits for users of the implanted chips, until it became extremely inconvenient to live without them.

The parents were told that the implants were the best way to provide inoculations against all sorts of viruses and diseases. And so they replaced the many injections with the one implant. Most parents went along with this. To ensure total compliance, parents around the galaxy were bombarded with mass media reports of a new pandemic, a virus that ate the brains of infants. They demanded the government do something. The government said it was working hard. Then it announced a breakthrough. It required the implantation of the chips to work. And so all parents, even those who had at first resisted the idea, became extremely keen to ensure that their new born child, too, would be first in line to get a new chip implant. And that was that. From now on the implant could be 'activated' during any public discussion, or decision making process.

The question Makras always asked himself, and which became the 'first question' each person was taught to ask themselves, was 'what principle could you deduce from my intended action, and would I want everyone else to act according to that principle'. In this way you could decide whether your intended action was 'good'. Good ethics, was, after all, simply a question of asking yourself 'if I were to make a habit of this behavior,

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and if everyone else were also to make a habit of it, which is only to be expected, then what would be the consequences?'

And oh there was so much more to learn. The ideology of cause and effect. How there are only interactions and outcomes. How nothing can be created, and thus life itself, sentience per se, the potential to be aware, well, why should it be any different? And this leads logically to the compelling argument that awareness per se is a property of energy-matter. It is not simply something that emerges from dead matter. How could awareness emerge from the interaction of things that are not themselves aware? You cannot create awareness. You can only change its form. What it is aware of.

The 'experience engine' we inhabit, the selves we feel ourselves to be at any given point, will die, but the potential to experience new experience engines is as indestructible as energy itself. Energy cannot be created or destroyed. You can only change its form. We are not the forms we experience being. We are the potential to experience being forms. We endure, even as the forms we experience being are born, grow, and die. We are noumenal. Beyond form. We experience life through the phenomenal world. It is a virtual reality play-station. It is a game platform. It is the expression of our will to enjoy experiences.

Other implications of human nature, especially stubborn denial, self-deception, and opportunism, also that lead Makras to institutionalise the everyday use of lie detectors, and even 'malice', 'envy', and 'jealousy' detectors. So called 'emoticons'.

To achieve transparency, Makras had cash eliminated, setting up one inter-galactic bank, through which all transactions had to proceed. It was impossible to avoid taxation, let alone evade it. The 'black' market evaporated. It became virtually impossible to corrupt people. Every transaction could be traced and identified. Of course people would inevitably try to exchange goods and services directly, in a form of 'barter' economy, but that was banned, and very easy to police, while very hard to continue on any large scale. You could not sell stolen or prohibited goods, because the only way to buy something was using the system. So there was little motive to steal anything. Or to produce illegal goods.

Cameras were placed everywhere to record interactions. Each person who did not have a chip implant was required to wear a recorder-GPS unit, so that the movements and locations of every citizen could be monitored and recorded. Court processes became very simple. For everything you did or said was likely to have been recorded. You might still stubbornly deny that the lie detectors worked, having once deceived yourself, and you might even convince yourself that all the camera and audio recordings had been 'faked', but that would be for your psychiatrist and you to deal with, and not the courts. Judges would have access to the lie detector results and incontrovertible data to make decisions.

Overnight most of the legal 'profession' became obsolete. There was no use for 'lawyers'. Expert computer programs explained the new, and very simplified, legal codes that Makras has instituted, for anyone who was interested. There was little chance of arguing your way out of a conviction, once you had committed a crime. There was little point denying it. Though of course it was human nature to do so.

Needless to say that victims usually received justice under the new systems. The court proceedings were quick, and completed socialised. There were no private lawyers. The proceedings cost the participants nothing. It was just a matter of asking questions, checking lie detectors, and using the available video evidence, and financial transaction records. There were no clever lawyers to talk their way out of justice, nor any 'loopholes'. Makras had realised that complex legal codes merely existed to make such 'loopholes' possible, so that the rich and powerful could avoid justice.

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The elimination of manipulative forms of advertising reduced the costs of most goods and services by about 25% overnight. Marketing was restricted to providing the public with factual information informing them about the advantages and disadvantages of products. De-intermediarisation, the elimination of most forms of 'middle-men' in the distribution of products and services, eliminated even more costs. Huge product viewing and sampling centers sprung up, replacing all the previous retail centers. You went in and checked out all the available products. You could taste test, smell test, and test-ride products. Once you had made your selection you would make a request for the product. When enough requests were received to reach optimal marginal cost production, the item was produced and shipped directly to the consumer, or picked up from local distribution centers.

All forms of protectionism, market manipulation, price fixing, and market speculation were eliminated. Eliminating the excess, unreasonable, and unfair profits that these techniques had previously granted share-holders and investors meant that prices to the consumer fell even further.

Lots of measures were introduced to ensure that waste was eliminated, and that everyone was employed productively producing products of real value. And so most goods and services suddenly became affordable to most people. And everyone was productively employed. No-one was employed producing dis-value. No-one was doing things which were counter-productive. Many products and services were discontinued, as either the products were unhealthy or dangerous, or the production process was dangerous and unhealthy for the people engaged in it. Those people who were 'freed up' by this process were soon employed in creative new ways.

Yes, there was a lot to learn. Makras had instituted so many 'optimalisations'. Once you realised just how many things he improved, it became clear why the new date keeping was introduced. For the galaxy, After Makras (A.M) was such a different, better, more productive, more creative, more peaceful, harmonious, synergistic world. It was an almost complete break with the past. Like a change directly from a stone age to a 'diamond' age. Later Makras clone Emperors agreed to use the term 'After-Optimalisation', A.O and Before Optimalisation B.O. They wanted the focus to be on the process, and not on the man himself.

So you can imagine that O.P and Renshaw were kept busy at their studies. Too busy for O.P to wonder much about Tim and PRI. Though he often had romantic fantasies about PRI. And he wished for a return to the friendship he had shared with Tim, before he had 'died'. When O.P had asked Commander Destin about them, Destin had, to O.P's mind a little mysteriously, simply shrugged off the question by saying that at least for now O.P was to concentrate on his studies. For he had a lot to catch up on.

And so it was that O.P and Renshaw became closer and closer, until O.P almost felt the same way about him as he had once felt about Tim. It was of course a huge change. From ultimate enemy to best friend. In fact O.P often wondered about this. For Renshaw proved a very good friend indeed. He was as sensitive and empathetic now as he had once been malicious and brutal. They shared all their courses, and became 'sparring partners' during the classes in self-defense. Soon Renshaw had mastered all the 'tricks' that O.P had used on him that long-ago day when O.P had stood up to him. O.P thought it was well and good that they were now on good terms. For Renshaw would make anyone a formidable opponent with his ever increasing size, strength, and skills.

One thing, though, puzzled O.P about Renshaw. It was the occasional times he had come across him talking with Commander Destin, and they had suddenly gone quiet, and then had appeared to have changed the subject of their conversation. When O.P asked Renshaw what they had been discussing, Renshaw became slightly evasive. O.P

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got the impression Renshaw was hiding something, Sure Renshaw appeared indifferent and transparent. But he also got the impression that Renshaw was working just a little too hard to appear that way. It was in his apparent attempts to appear like he was concealing nothing, that Renshaw revealed the fact. At least his behavior was enough to raise suspicions in O.P's mind. But what could he be hiding?

Renshaw would say they had been talking about his prospects for entry into the Imperial service, and later the Imperial bodyguard. But O.P sensed there was something more to it. Something that Renshaw was not letting him in on. Some secret. Some mystery. But still, he would be extremely pleased if one day Renshaw could be among the elite bodyguard corps. It would be an honor for him, and a comfort to O.P. For he could think of no more loyal and competent a guard to have around than Renshaw.

Of course O.P could not help wondering about his 'parents'. After having been separated from them for 13 years, he kind of thought they should be keen to see him. And, well, of course O.P was keen to see them. But he also had a lot of mixed feelings. He was not sure how he would react to meeting them. After all, they had sent him away, and left him to be raised by 'Uncle Roy'. Not the acts of warm, loving, caring, parents. Or?

Just why did they do it? What could he expect from them now? There were so many questions and conflicting emotions welling up in O.P that they threatened to engulf and swamp him, like a tidal wave. But when O.P really thought about it, Commander Destin, 'Uncle Roy', had been the only parents O.P had ever really known.

And in reality, well, who were in fact his parents? If he was a clone of Makras the Optimiser, then his father, to be clinically accurate, was actually 53 generations old. His father was the same father as Makras the Optimiser. So 'daddy' had died a long long time ago. Thousands of years ago. That left the question of who his 'mother' might be. And seeing as how he was a clone, this 'mother' was more a 'host' than a real mother. For he and her shared no genetic material. So, as you can guess, things were quite confusing for O.P. He had no idea what to expect.

In reality his only biological family were the current Emperor, and the other 'clones'. Now the emperor was, like him, a clone of Makras the Optimiser. So were they brothers? Well, no, to be precise. For they were clones. But in a way that made them, genetically at least, brothers. Right? Or? So you can see that the notion of a real 'homecoming' would have been misplaced, under the circumstances.

Oh, and as for the other 'clones'. Now from what he understood, they were all in competition for the Emperor's throne. Talk about 'sibling rivalry'. Only they were not exactly siblings now, were they? They were clones. Like identical twins.

Now O.P had studied genetics and embryology, and so he knew that even genetically identical twins were not bound to be 'identical' as such. They could be quite different. And his studies in sociology, social psychology, and psychology had taught him that the experiences and environment a child grew up in played a large role in how their personality and character developed. Some qualities would be expressed, and others repressed, by environment. By conditioning. By experience.

But if he had understood correctly, all the twins had been raised in circumstances meant to as closely replicate those of Makras the Optimiser as possible. And so they should all be very similar. So he was really curious, as you could imagine, to meet them.

Only it seemed that was unlikely. For they were to be kept apart. That was part of the 'protocols', as Commander Destin had explained. He might never meet them. And the best chance he had of ever meeting them would probably be, according to Destin, during the final testing. Only during the last state of the selection process. A process

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which, ultimately, would determine which of the clones would be next in line for the 'Emperor's throne.

O.P was not at all sure he wanted to win. But he was very curious to see how he would do in the testing. He was very curious to see just how and what they would be testing.

And though Destin had not actually said so, O.P got the feeling that something was up. Someone had tampered with their space ship. Some people had been sent to kill them. And Roy had alluded to the fact that two of the clones had been 'disqualified' from the competition. Something about their 'character'. But Destin had never gone into details. And so it left O.P to wonder if there might be any connection between the assassins, the 'incident' on the space ship, and the disqualification of the two clones.

During what he had managed to learn of history on earth, it seemed that when it came to kings, queens, royalties, and power, sons killed fathers, and brothers killed brothers. Only in this case there were not the same sorts of motives now as there had been on Earth. It was more a question of responsibilities than of privileges. It really was about responsibilities rather than benefits. Assuming the next emperor maintained the existent institutions, of course. And of course they would. Wouldn't they?

Chapter Eighteen: Dreams

Around this time O.P kept having dreams about PRI. Some of them were 'wet' dreams in which he had vague ideas of meeting with PRI some place private, her smiling that welcoming, accepting smile, and inviting him to pull down her panties and, well... So he'd wake up with a sticky mess all over his ... O.K, so every boy knows what he experienced. For girls it's less messy. But as O.P learned in his sex education modules, if girls and boys don't masturbate or have some sort of sexual release, they up having such dreams. And these dreams, for both boys and girls, will end in orgasm, if they are lucky!

But most of O.P's dreams were much more romantic and sentimental. He had had one dream in particular so often that it felt as real as a real memory. In this dream he and PRI were adults.

He and PRI had apparently not seen each other for some time, and had just ran into each other in the street. The dream repeated, more or less the same each time, along the following lines. He'd say 'You are here with a man?' 'Yes'. You've been with him long? She'd reply 'Yes, quite some time'.

His disappointment at this news would grow and grow until it became almost unbearable. He felt it would be impossible that she didn't see it too. He dreaded to ask for details, but he couldn't help putting himself through the agony. He just had to know. He dreaded finding out the truth, but he had to be sure. 'You...ah, do you love him?' He dragged these words out of himself like pulling barbed wire out of a festering wound, tortured by every syllable'. And as if to mock and torment him, she would reply 'Yes, very much', and it was like a sledgehammer just hit him into the ground and he suddenly became pale, shrunken, a foot shorter, and 200 Kgs heavier.

And then she would suddenly burst out laughing, having enjoyed teasing him, and seeing how deeply he has suffered, how greatly he had been affected by the idea of her having some lover, laughing in joy and charmed by the depth of his emotions. And in this context her following remarks always seem unbearably cruel. 'Well, you see, he's my Daddy'.

Each time he hears this he tries to recover himself, 'Oh, I see, like that is it', wounded by the use of such an intimate nick-name, and all that belonged to it, the intimacies they

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shared with each other which he would never get to share. Broken, dispirited, but trying, unsuccessfully, to hide it, he looks past her.

Does she imagine it, or is he about to cry? His feet are stuck to the ground it seems, and he doesn't know where to look. And so she takes a good look at his face, and reads all this in his features. She is looking to test the depth of his interest in her. It was very romantic. But then she realised it was not fair to keep torturing him, once she felt confident she had read his feelings and intentions, his longings, correctly. So she quickly adds, as if just casually, as if she hadn't noticed all these feelings surging through him, radiating from him like some hopelessly lost romantic hero. 'Mr Brooks?' she inflects.

'Huh? His mind is still reeling from the shock. It doesn't seem capable of putting two and two together. 'I'm Clarissa Brooks.' She inflects again. He looks at her stunned, his mind trying to catch up with the change in her situation, in his situation. His whole world has suddenly changed. It goes from complete darkness to light in an instant. Suddenly he blooms with hope, growing a foot taller, and as light as a feather, before her eyes. His eyes moisten and brighten as his mind relays the logical implications of the utterances that had just then slipped into his unconscious, as his conscious mind was recovering from its shell shock at the previous misunderstandings.

'My...' PRI begins, but O.P interrupts as the revelation spills from his lips as his unconscious reckonings suddenly burst into his consciousness. 'Your father'.

'Yes silly. What did you think? That I've got some sugar daddy here in town?' Well, ah, Um', he stammers. 'She laughs and gives him the most stunning smile. It fills him with a sense of the love that flows from her. A love that she seems to offer to him. Just to him. Maybe. A chance. A hope at something more wonderful than anything the world could possibly have to offer.

She is a natural flirt. Playfully, as she turns on her heels, she adds 'Yep, I'm still up for grabs. Know anyone might be interested?' With this she is gone, walking briskly down the street. He is stuck to the concrete where he stands, as if planted there. He can't move. His entire will is focused on the recent revelation, and the potential it holds. And she seems to be slipping away. But then she stops suddenly, turning her radiating beauty towards him, her eyes smiling and, joyously, as if she has just enjoyed some fantastic victory, she holds up her hand to make the 'call me' sign.

He panics. 'Her number!'. He hates himself for being so stupid. 'He hadn't gotten her number', he accuses himself. But just then he sees her type something on her phone, and his own phone announces 'You have ONE message'. His finger fumbles in a trance for the 'read' button. He glances down at his phone. It is a message from Clarissa. He feels a surge of relief and calm wash over him.

Then he quickly looks up, almost fearfully, but she has already disappeared into the crowd. He reads the message. He feels as if he is standing on a ship in heavy seas, as the ground beneath his feet seems to swell and heave. His heart leaps with joy.

'Whew, he thinks, I must have left my 'bump' function on. She got my number as we were talking. She was certainly standing close enough. He recalls her lips, her intoxicating breath. Just standing that close, speaking with her, was the most sensually dramatic experience he has ever had. Every sense of his has come alive. Everything seems brighter, more vibrant, more full of life, more full. He remembers her smell, her lips, her...he trembles just at the thought. He craves those lips, hungering to kiss them, to taste her mouth, to hold her body tightly against his. So tight that they melt into each other and become one. Oh what heavenly bliss that must be. Just to hold her in his arms. Oh the smell of her.

And just then, always in this dream at about this moment, the rest of the people in the world re-appear as if from no-where, bumping into him, impatient, irritated. Some make

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angry comments. Only then he suddenly realises he has been on another planet for the last 30 seconds. He hasn't noticed anything going on the world around him. He has gone from a sheer desperate panic, from hell, to utter bliss, to heaven, and now he is back in the ordinary world. And it is a busy world, and he is getting in people's way. And so, at this point in this dream, he collects himself quickly and gets out of their way. This island of hope and joy in a flowing mass of hopelessness, tedium, irritation, frustration, impatience, and indifference. A living being among the living dead. That's how it feels to him, in this dream. Because in this dream, he is back on Earth.

Chapter Nineteen: 'BUMP'-ing

'Bump' was, on Eulin at least, the way people met and 'hooked up'. It was a feature integrated into the 'personal communications and transactions unit', or P.C.T.U., that each citizen carried with them at all times. O.P figured they were a kind of smart phone. But they were in fact much much more. As in O.P's dream, you could set it up to automatically exchange as much information with people you 'bump'-ed into as you desired. It was used for all transactions, and all interactions with government authorities. It was your I.D card, bank card, driver's license, door key, and 'cloud' interface all in one.

It was actually Renshaw who explained the whole deal of 'Bump' to O.P. Renshaw had come home excited from one of his group sessions in the school. These were regular meetings hosted by a psychologist, where the students discussed whatever was on their mind. And it had been at this meeting that Renshaw had learned about 'Bump'. He had quickly gone to the school's 'Bump' office to register.

Renshaw explained to O.P how they had taken 'full body scans' with which they had reproduced a 3-D hologram of him. It was funny, he said, looking at himself as others saw him. Much different than just looking in a mirror. For one thing you could rotate the hologram on every axis, and see yourself from every possible angle. They took these scans, and then loaded them onto a server. Then they got him to answer all sorts of questions about what he liked and didn't like in potential friends, and to his surprise, sexual partners. Now he had never even come close to having a 'sexual partner'. The thought left him almost too excited to think clearly enough to give useful answers to all the questions that were asked as part of the 'Bump' registration process.

They then showed him hundreds of potential 'matches'. Only the weird thing was that there were two separate data bases. One only showed bodies. The other showed faces and heads. So you couldn't actually match up the bodies to the heads. It seems that if you 'chose' the head, but not the body, or vice versa, then no 'match' was made. Only when you had by chance selected the person's head and body, was a match made. And then you were only notified if that person had also 'matched' with you, having selected both your head and body as 'desirable'.

The graphics were high definition 3-D. You could 'float' around an image and view it from any imaginable angle. It was interesting how different a face could look from all those different angles. Renshaw was advised by the screen about relative heights, and the intelligent program suggested the correct angles to use to view the person how they would appear to him in real life, based on their relative heights. For a face or body could look quite different depending on whether you were looking down or up at it. Renshaw wondered how much that could account for the sometimes contradictory opinions different people often had about the physical attractiveness of the same person.

It seemed to Renshaw that, like everything he had come into contact with in this new world, the designers had really thought the thing through. For if you didn't actually end

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up meeting the person, you would never have been able to match any of the bodies to their heads. And so if you met them on the street, you would have no idea that you had actually seen them naked on the computer. It was a form of privacy that was quite clever.

You then got to meet 'mutual matches' at any of the many 'Bump' clubs. There was one close to the school. And then if you actually hit it off with someone in person, you signed an agreement stating what sorts of things you were giving your informed consent to, on this first 'date'. It seems many girls limited the first 'dates' to mutual masturbation, with the option of oral sex. But many older women were often keen to have sex with younger men, even on the first 'date'. All 'dates' were registered, along with their 'consent' forms. And if you had no place to 'go', you could simply book one of the public booths found in every 'Bump' club. They were cheap, and rented by the hour. And if you both agreed, you could let other people watch, either on cams or through special 'peep holes'. And of course if you both chose, you could find other couples interested in 'hooking up' with you as a couple. You could just watch, or join in. Nothing 'had' to happen, but everything 'could'. It was up to you, and your spontaneous impulses.

All citizens who had completed their 'initiation', which for males included the 'sperm harvest' and vasectomy, and for both sexes included a successful completion of their sexual education modules, could register with, and then use, the 'Bump' service. It was free. It was run by the government. However there was no pressure placed upon anyone to join in the 'fun', as Renshaw put it.

O.P listened intently. But all he could think about was PRI. Was PRI registered? Did PRI go in for that kind of thing? At one level he was extremely excited about the prospect of 'hooking up with' PRI on a 'Bump' date. But at another level he was quite sad, to think of his idealised perfect girl being so 'free' with her 'love'.

Renshaw, however, was a 'free agent', with no romantic connections. He couldn't wait for his first 'date'. For he and O.P had almost completed their 'Sex Ed' module. And soon loads of girls would be viewing his 3-D holograms, and maybe one of them would chose him. He wouldn't be picky. 'As long as she had the right bits in the right places', Renshaw had joked, he would be quite happy to go along with whatever she gave her 'consent' to.

Of course he was being quite cocky, on the surface, but O.P could tell that this 'masked' a deeper uncertainty, almost a fear, of that 'first time'. Sure they had covered all this sort of stuff in their sex education modules. But that was all theory. O.P hoped Renshaw's first experience would be a positive one. But O.P himself was in no hurry. He wouldn't dare to admit it to Renshaw, but he had this romantic notion of 'waiting' for PRI. He wanted his first time to be really special. He wanted it to be with PRI. He was willing to wait. And then, if that never came to pass, well, if that wasn't meant to be, then he would avail himself of the 'Bump' service.

But when he thought of Renshaw going in for it straight off the bat like that, he had to admit he did feel a little envious. He was not sure if he was making the right choice in waiting. What if PRI and he never got together? And he had 'wasted' years in which he could have been having the greatest 'fun' in the world?'. Thoughts like that occasionally lead him to doubt his decision, and occasionally, after hearing Renshaw 'brag' about his recent 'experiences', he almost gave up on PRI, and decided to go and register straight away. But then he would get to thinking about PRI, about the warm scent that rose from her body when she stood close to him, talking, her perfect mouth moving and forming the words, with her lovely pink tongue occasionally showing as she spoke in that lovely, soft, pretty voice of hers, and he would forget all about Renshaw and his 'escapades'.

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Chapter Twenty: Is this for real?

Since beginning the 'field' phases of their training, their 'classes' had become a lot of fun. But then one morning their trainer, Justine, came into their room as they were clowning around, and suddenly the tone went from fun to serious. Deadly serious. She looked terrible. Gone were her usual 'sunny' features. Her quick warm smile. Her joking. Her playfulness. She didn't say a word. She didn't have to. Something was clearly weighing on her mind. Renshaw and O.P gave each other the same look. Having confirmed each other's concerns, they turned to Justine. O.P took the lead and attempted to find out what the matter was. 'Is everything O.K Justine? You look, well, you look...'

'You don't look your normal self', Renshaw chimed in. O.P gave him a grateful look, urging him on to probe deeper. 'It's none of our business, but, well, you know, if there's anything we can do, we'd be more than happy to, ah...'

Justine smiled at her two students, clearly grateful for their sympathy. But she gave no other clues as to what was behind her sudden change of mood. Rather than reveal anything, she deliberately put on a 'mask' of cheerfulness, and tried to act as if everything were fine. But she had trained her two best students too well, and they saw through the attempt. If anything it only made her seem even more troubled. It left them wondering what could be so terrible that she had to pretend she was not worrying about it.

Renshaw was about to continue with their interrogation, but barely managed to get a 'But you seem so...' before O.P gave him a look that silenced him. He got the message. They would go along with her 'charade' for the moment, until some new opportunity opened up to them to delve deeper into the mystery. No point pushing things. If she was going to tell them anything, she would do so when she was ready. All they could do was wait and give her the space she needed, and hope that she would open up about it herself. They would let her know they were there for her, if and when she decided to talk. For now they would just ignore 'the elephant in the room'.

But it wasn't long before new signs of stress showed in Justine's carefully put-on 'mask'. She was already 15 minutes into the day's lessons before O.P and Renshaw wondered when she was going to realise that they had completed this lesson yesterday. They weren't sure if they should bring it to her attention, and both could see that the other was thinking the same thing, when out of nowhere Justine broke down in tears. They immediately got up and went over to her, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder, and helping her over to the sofa that was in the corner of the room. Then O.P went over to the desk and made some coffee for her, while Renshaw stood by her, patting her shoulder solicitously.

As O.P returned with the coffee Renshaw gave him a look that said 'what do we do now?'. O.P answered with a look that said 'beats me'. 'Here's a cup of coffee Justine. Looks like you could use one'.

'Thanks O.P. Yes. I really could use a good cuppa right now. It's just...It's so...I'm just so...' Justine replied, unable to find the words to express whatever it was that she so clearly wanted to say.

'Something is wrong. Isn't it? Is there anything we can do? Maybe Commander Destin?' O.P offered, looking first to Justine and then to Renshaw, hoping he might have some ideas.

'It's...'. 'They've...'. 'I mean...' she blurted out, seemingly unable to finish a sentence.'

'They?' O.P queried, seeing a chance at getting somewhere finally.

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'Yes', Justine managed to get out between tears. 'They've taken Jamie, and they said I'm not to tell anyone. They said that if I don't do what they demand, they will do terrible things to him.' O.P and Renshaw knew Jamie was her little son. She often talked about him. He was everything in the world to her. They could only imagine how devastated she must be at this moment.

Renshaw asked what he and O.P were both thinking. 'What did they want?'

'I'm supposed to put a tracking device on you', she said, looking O.P directly in the eyes, then letting her gaze fall to the floor. 'If I don't, they won't let Jamie go.' She couldn't stop herself from breaking into a fit of sobbing, as Renshaw and O.P looked at each other, feeling helpless to comfort her.

'Look there must be a way out of this. I'm going to have to bring Commander Destin in on this. But don't worry. You can trust him. He won't tell a soul. The kidnappers would have told you that if you tell anyone they will...ah...well they...' O.P stuttered, not wanting to allude to any possible harm that they might do to Jamie. Justine was in a bad enough state as it was, without actively encouraging her imagination.

'Yes, they said they would kill Jamie if I told anyone about this', Justine offered, this time sounding much more in control. 'They said that they would only let him go after I got this tracking device attached to you, and they could see it was working. But only after they had...well...but I don't think they will let him go whatever I do. You see? I just don't know what to do. It's just so...so...'

'Yes you're in an impossible situation. No-one could know what to do', Renshaw offered, helpfully.

'But we'd both trust Commander Destin with our lives, wouldn't we Renshaw', O.P exclaimed confidently.

'Yes, of course', Renshaw added, with as much confidence as he could muster.

'So where is it? The tracking device I mean. Let's start by putting it on me, so we give the kidnappers no reason to question your loyalty', O.P suggested.

Renshaw, with a note of real command in his voice, then spoke out his thoughts aloud. 'Yes, good thinking. That will buy us some time. We will inform Commander Destin and keep things 'business as usual' while we work out a plan. We can't yet know if, or how they might be observing us. So we'd better go about things as normal for now. Keep to the schedule. Follow the normal routines. Do nothing to suggest that anything unusual has happened. Let them have a false sense of confidence and control. It will encourage them to relax a little, and maybe make a mistake. And they will have no reason to, ah, to...to hurt anyone. And as long as they think Justine is playing along, they will take good care of Jamie, as their insurance. They need Justine and so they won't do anything to jeopardize her co-operation. Jamie is safe at least as long as they need her help. So we let them think she is helping.'

O.P and Justine stared at Renshaw as he gave this remarkable performance. This was a whole new side to Renshaw that they had never seen before. He was displaying a commanding, 'take charge' attitude that immediately reminded them of Commander Destin. O.P and Justine were so impressed that they forgot for the moment exactly what a terrible situation they were in. They were overwhelmed by his sudden new-found presence and authority. It inspired them with confidence. They exchanges looks at each other that communicated this shared sentiment, before once again turning to Renshaw. Meanwhile Renshaw was working out a way to 'just happen to run into' Destin as soon as possible, without raising anyone's suspicions.

'We have to find some way of getting in touch with Commander Destin without evoking the slightest worry in the minds of the kidnappers that Justine may have betrayed them.'

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If O.P keeps the tracking device on him, they will feel confident that Justine has betrayed him. And that leaves us to work out who they are, and why they want to keep such close track of O.P. Any ideas Justine? Any clues as to who they might be?

'Sorry, but I have absolutely no idea who they are. I can't think of anyone with a reason to track O.P. As far as I know the galaxy has enjoyed the longest time of continued peace and prosperity it has ever known. I have no idea of anyone who could possibly bear any malice towards O.P. No political rivals. No civil unrest. No rebels or terrorists. I have no idea what this could mean. In fact at first I thought it was just someone's idea of a joke. It just seemed so surreal. So stupid. So completely 'out of the blue'. I couldn't see why anyone would want to track O.P. Let alone kidnap my Jamie to force me to do it', Justine replied, completely perplexed herself.

Renshaw was pacing slowly across the room. 'So we are just going to have to hope that something they do from now on will give us a clue. And a chance to find them before they can do anything to Jamie'.

At this reference to possible harm coming to Jamie tears quietly welled up in Justine's eyes and rolled down her cheeks. She could do nothing to stop them. And O.P and Renshaw felt just as powerless to ease her suffering. It was a terrible feeling, this feeling of powerlessness at the hands of some malicious, unknown, perhaps ruthless enemy. It was a feeling that O.P and Renshaw were determined was not going to get the better of them. At once they felt a mutual resolve to gain the upper hand on their adversary. They would lure them out into the open, where they could first identify them. Then once they knew their enemy, they would formulate a plan of action to defeat them. But first things first. Everything would have its time and place. For now they would play the waiting game. Wait and watch.

Renshaw came over and he and O.P sat down either side of Justine, hoping that their mere physical presence might be of some comfort to her. They patted her on the shoulder and tried to appear as positive, purposeful, and confident as they could. All the while they were fearing the worst for Justine and Jamie. To this was added, in Renshaw's mind, the fear that someone out there had bad intentions towards O.P. But O.P himself did not for a moment spare a thought for his own safety. He was completely focused on Justine and Jamie's dire straits. There was no room in his thoughts for himself. And so this left Renshaw to worry about him alone. And worried he was.

For Renshaw might know more about this situation than he was letting on. Destin had been 'briefing' him for months now during 'secret' meetings. O.P had stumbled upon their clandestine meetings more than once, but Renshaw and Destin had managed to make it look completely casual. Afterward when O.P had asked him about it, Renshaw had given him the explanation he had prepared for such an occasion, to throw O.P off the scent. And as far as he knew, he had managed to convince O.P that there was nothing 'going on', to use O.P's own words. As far as Renshaw knew, O.P had 'swallowed' his story without any doubts or hesitation.

If O.P had been suspicious that Renshaw and Destin had been having secret meetings, discussing something important regarding O.P behind his back, then he had never let on.

So as far as Renshaw was concerned, he himself was the only one of the three people in the room who had any idea whatsoever about who was behind the kidnapping, and what their final motives might be. And he suspected that Commander Destin would already know about the kidnapping, one way or another. If not, he soon would. Renshaw would casually 'drop' the formal 'catch word' he had been given to use for moments like this, to alert Destin that some emergency had emerged which he could not safely directly allude to in public without jeopardizing another agent's safety. Destin would then 'remind' Renshaw of a supposed 'appointment' he had with him soon after,

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or arrange some other 'casual' encounter, during which Renshaw could pass on all the information, without fear that anyone might suspect anything of the encounter.

For Destin had shared some very sensitive information with Renshaw. It concerned things he had already had experience of on earth. Those 'terminators'. The assassins of Engodith. King Aitah. So far no-one could work out exactly what his motives were. What could he possibly have to gain from the death of O.P? What could anyone hope to gain by killing O.P? The best minds of the Empire had been working on that riddle for months now, but had come to no really compelling conclusions. No-one could see what anyone could hope to gain through O.P's death. And yet clearly King Aitah had sent his hired goons, the assassins of Engodith, to kill O.P on earth.

Chapter Twenty One: Deacon returns. (Tracking the tracker)

Commander Destin didn't have his usual confident body language today. Or the usual 'bounce' to his micro-gestures. It was the first thing that O.P noticed about him. That and a sort of distracted look seemed to enter his features, when he thought no-one was watching him. O.P felt that Destin's mind was elsewhere most of the time. And where it was it was not having a picnic. So much he was certain of. If O.P hadn't known better, he would think that Destin seemed 'edgy'.

If it were anyone else you might simply say that he didn't appear totally in control of the situation, and leave it at that. But Destin? Out of control? Destin the Commander by nature, not only by profession? The man whose limits had been tried and tested and found not wanting in the least. The man who had come through decades of operational field-work without the slightest hint of damage? What could possibly 'rattle' someone of Commander Destin's stature and experience? It was this thought that rattled O.P now.

First Justine and now Destin. Everyone's nerves seemed to be falling to pieces around O.P. It might have been easier to take if not for Renshaw's new strange manner around him too. If O.P had had to define it, really put his finger on it, he would have said that Renshaw appeared guilty. But of what? What on earth could Renshaw have to feel guilty about in relation to O.P? Just one more puzzle to add to the pile. And O.P was not one who enjoyed puzzles. He preferred answers. Straight-forward, transparent, simple answers. He liked to be able to calculate probabilities and be able to construct reasonable expectations. He liked to anticipate problems. Then he could work on potential solutions to the problems well before they materialised.

Up until recently his life had been quite predictable, even if he could not quite always manage to find solutions to the predictable problems. And then suddenly all these surprises. Discovering that his 'Uncle' was really an elite member of the most elite forces of the galaxy, oh, and that he himself was really the clone of the most important Emperor that galaxy had ever had, and a potential Emperor-in-waiting himself. And that defeat of Renshaw who then became his best friend. O.P had had a lot of surprises lately. Things he could never have been prepared for, no matter how much warning he had received.

But since then things had seemed to be, well, as they seemed to be. He thought he'd seen the end of such surprises. And to be honest he welcomed this. He felt much more comfortable with the new school routine. He had his place in the world and he was doing his best to live up to the world's expectations of him.

But suddenly all that routine seemed to have flown out the window and, perhaps, off to a quieter, more reasonable, more predictable place. The sort of place O.P wished he were in now.

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Everyone was behaving strangely. O.P felt lost. He didn't know where he could turn. He wanted things to be consistent and reliable. He wanted Commander Destin looking confident and in control as usual. He wanted Renshaw playing practical jokes on him, and sharing his lewd stories of sexual adventures with the girls he had met on 'bump'. He wanted Justine all perky and fun again.

So he was quite pleased when Deacon turned up with 'Its-a-cat', whom he had officially 'adopted' as his 'assistant'. He was here to sort out the problem with the tracking device, or 'bug', as Deacon called it, that Pauline was to attach to O.P. As far as Commander Destin had explained to O.P, he was going to do something clever to the bug, so that whoever wanted to track O.P would reveal their own location as soon as they began tracking him.

Deacon was as quirky as ever, only now with an added touch of self-assurance and self-esteem. 'It's-a-cat' was as good a therapist as ever, jumping up into O.P's lap, purring and caressing O.P affectionately, easing O.P's troubled mind at least for the moment. 'Its-a-cat' of course sensed that Pauline was also in distress, and generously handed out the same course of 'treatment' to her.

Deacon immediately went over to Pauline to inspect the tracking device. He took out a few instruments and quietly mumbled a few comments almost as if to himself. 'Yes, well, you see, what we have here is a class 9 G.P.S transponder. Very advanced. In fact I would imagine it must be a prototype. I haven't seen any on the market like this. The patents office had informed me that a company had recently submitted a proposal for several new patents on technical specs very similar to my own patents. They had so far made no decision as to whether the changes constituted a real technological advance or not, and had wanted my opinion about whether they should award the patent. Of course their decision could cost me hundreds of millions of credits, but that was not what interested me. What interested me was their claim that the new design had solved a few problems which I had not as yet managed to 'iron out' in my own designs.

Deacon noted a hint of impatience in Commander Destin's features, and was equally aware of, and sympathetic with, the sense of urgency that radiated from Pauline. And so he 'cut to the chase'. 'O.K, but what interests us right now is whether I can put a 'trace' on this 'tracker'. That I think should be no problem. I won't risk disassembling it just in case it is programmed to 'report' any tampering. I am just going to take a quick 'scan' of it. That should let me identify the transponder type and 'hack' its code. I will spare you all the technicalities, but if I do this the right way, then all 'tracing' will be passive and leave no 'signature' for them to read.'

'So they won't know we've put a trace on them?' Commander Destin asked hopefully, his voice revealing more than a hint of weariness. O.P could hardly believe the impression Destin was making on him. Destin actually appeared to be, well, almost overwhelmed. This shocked everyone present, so used to Destin's usual self-assurance. Even 'Its-a-cat' seemed to sense something was wrong, looking up at Destin with a 'caring' countenance.

'That's about the gist of it', Deacon replied, trying, with his tone, to convey some comforting reassurance. 'We will be able to trace their return signal as soon as they engage the tracker. And then it will just be a matter of using the resources which you, Commander Destin, have at your disposal, to locate the receiver, and identify the trackers.' This last bit he added hoping to boost the Commander's morale. Something seemed to have 'shaken' him. He just seemed so 'passive'. Not his typical 'take-charge' commanding presence. Deacon wondered what it could be. But his wondering would have to take a number and join the queue, for right now his priority was getting the 'trace' set up, so that Commander Destin would have the tools he needed to once again take charge of the situation.

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Deacon gave Justine a furtive glance to check a growing suspicion that there was something 'personal' going on between Destin and herself. Something that might explain the tension in Destin. He couldn't be sure, but he 'smelled' that something was going on between them. Nothing surprising. She was a very attractive woman. And Destin had that sort of rugged charm that was bound to attract women. But then Deacon noted something else. Some sort of tension between O.P and Renshaw. And some sort of secretive connection between Renshaw and Destin.

'Oh it was just too much', Deacon thought to himself, withdrawing a little from the speculations and empathies that he had allowed his mind to wander into. All these little psycho-dramas. He was looking forward to being alone again with his electronics, and the small team of quirky specialists that had been assigned to him on his 'election' to the Imperial Secret service. He liked his 'mysteries' to be electronic. Physics was his thing. People were just too, well, complicated by comparison. He was getting on quite well with his new team. 'It's-a cat' was a great companion. He was pretty sure that his own good standing in the team was more due to 'Its-a-cat's interpersonal skills, than his own.

Nurse Brooks was even talking about making a visit. In fact Commander Destin had 'pulled some strings', and she would soon be receiving an employment offer with the Imperial Health Services. She would be posted in Deacon's division. Things were really looking good for Deacon. And no-one who knew him and his history would begrudge him his change in luck. He was definitely in line for a spell of good fortune.

Chapter Twenty Two: A conspiracy?

Renshaw wondered when Destin was going to let O.P in on the secret. It appeared to him that it was surely the Engodith assassins, or whoever King Aitah had hired this time, that were behind this latest development. They were hoping to keep track of O.P until they found him in a suitable spot for a new attempt on his life. They didn't want witnesses. In any case they wouldn't leave any witnesses around to offer the authorities any clues. They were professionals. Very expensive professionals. And they did a professional job. As clean a 'hit' as anyone could expect. They left no clues behind. Nothing to link them to the 'incident'. Nothing to link their 'employers' to the incident. In most cases they were so proficient at their task that no-one would ever even suspect that an incident had even taken place at all. It would appear, for all intensive purposes, to have been an 'accident'. Investigators would have no eye-witnesses. They would have no clues. There would be no reason to even investigate. Usually the victim would appear to have died of 'natural' causes, or of some mishap, some 'accident'.

But everyone was stumped as to what possible motive King Aitah might have for wanting O.P dead. For he was the only one who might have anything to gain by destabilizing the Empire, even slightly. He was about the only ruler outside the Empire with any sort of real power. With any real political sway. He was the only one who had ever managed to even attempt anything remotely resembling a rebellion in the galaxy. And most political analysts merely interpreted his ramblings as deliberate provocations intended to gain potential benefits in trade negotiations with the Empire.

He would re-play the old charade over and over each time as trade negotiations would either be approaching, or stumbling. He would 'threaten' some sort of hostile military action. He would suggest that rebellion was imminent. He would allude to some new secret weapon his military had been developing. He would then allude to certain 'concessions' whose adoption and acceptance he would look on very favorably. The whole charade was a transparent attempt to gain a better deal for his trade negotiations.

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Those trade negotiators dealing with him were well aware of such tricks, and so they deliberately played up to his home planet's public opinion, making a big show of 'bending' to King Aitah's 'demands'. Just enough to expedite the new trade agreement that the Empire's traders were seeking to 'close' on. Just enough apparent concessions to make Aitah look like the tough guy he liked to portray himself as in front of his home crowd. It was all for public consumption. All for public opinion. For his public. It usually cost the Empire very little, if anything, and kept King Aitah happy.

But the assassination attempts added a whole new dimension to Aitah's typical strategy. Assuming of course that the attempts were genuine. And if you hired Engodith, then you meant business. Once you engaged them, you paid them, and you left them to their work. No-one had ever even tried to recall them, once they had been paid. You paid them and that was it. No more contact. Then one day in the near future you read the pleasant-to-you news of the sudden unexpected and untimely death of an enemy of yours. And that was that. That was how you did business with the Engodith. You told them who you wanted to meet with an untimely 'accidental' death. Then you paid them. That was that. The person was as good as dead. They were 'walking dead'. They were dead already and just didn't know it.

And the only one who could afford them these days was Aitah. There hadn't been a 'hired hit' in the Empire for a long long time. The simple fact was that no-one inside the Empire could afford the services of the Engodith. And the Engodith had a monopoly on this particular 'business'. Of course they had assassinated the competition. These days they appeared to be 'branching out' into the private security business. Their high priests had even 'tweaked' their religion a little to encompass such business ventures as equally 'noble' as assassination. The old religious texts were given a little 'spin' here and there. Some new 'interpretations' were given 'official sanction'. And so the Engodith culture had accommodated the change. It had proven itself capable of adapting. It was evolving into a more complex culture. A culture which now valued a new range of different trades, and had left the old days behind.

These new changes were quite welcome by the mass of the Engodith population who had never been directly involved in any killing. Like any planet, you had your 'export' services or goods. The Engodith 'exported' death. Assassinations. Assassins. Some planets had specialised in mercenary warfare. They fought wars for money. Others had specialised in 'secret' banking.

But whatever the big 'export' service or good, most people on any planet were employed in providing goods and services for their own people. People needed to be fed, clothed, housed, and educated. They needed medical and dental services. They needed to be entertained. Everything they consumed had to be produced somewhere. And most services could only reasonably be provided by locals. And most of these honest citizens had no love of killing. They wanted peace and prosperity. The general population of Engodith had secretly loathed all the previous focus on killing in their religion. They were quite happy when suddenly some of the, up till then, heretical, teachings of their ancient prophets were suddenly officially sanctioned. Their previously heretical teachings of peace and universal love now had a chance of finding their place in the heart of the Engodith religious 'canon'.

Only a few rogue Kings on the fringes of the galaxy could have afforded an Engodith 'hit'. Intelligence agency specialists had run their data through P.R.O.P.H.E.T. None of them had profiled as potential rebels. None except Aitah. And Aitah was only 'flagged' as a potential 'nuisance'. Not a 'threat' as such.

King Aitah seemed to enjoy 'baiting' the Empire, stepping in to give it a little 'slap', and then quickly retreating beyond its reach. Much like a cowardly fighter who seeks cheap hits on an opponent but is unwilling to actually 'close' with their enemy, for fear of

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being injured themselves. And these actions of King Aitah's were purely for home consumption. They were designed to boost his image as a 'tough guy'. They were to boost his public appeal in his own realm. No-one had ever considered them as real attempts to 'upset' the harmony of the Empire. And certainly no-one would ever have considered them as genuine threats to the Empire. It would have been as absurd a proposition as a mosquito seriously seeking to defeat an elephant in combat. But then mosquitoes sometimes carried much deadlier predators, viruses. So the Empire never underestimated any threat.

As far as the Empires' political analysts knew, King Aitah was still in full possession of his mental faculties. There was no indications that he had gone mad. And the intelligence capabilities of the Empire were impressive. If King Aitah, or any other of the millions of potential 'threats' to the Empire's peace and prosperity, so much as sneezed, this physiological phenomenon was entered into the data banks of P.R.O.P.H.E.T and its potential ramifications were calculated in the form of probabilities and even possibilities.

Still the question remained unanswered. Destin had recently sent a few Engodith Assassins to their just desserts, if, according to the Engodith's own belief system, a warrior who died while carrying out their professional duties with due care was granted entry to paradise. And they had not been sent to earth to write a report on government housing standards. No. The only reasonable assumption was that they had been sent to kill O.P.

'But Aitah?' Though Destin was familiar with this King's antics, and Aitah had been his reflex thought on hearing of the Engodith's arrival and search for O.P from Renshaw, he was becoming less and less certain as the days progressed. It just didn't add up. For one thing Aitah had not made the usual public boasting that usually attended his little 'attacks' on the Empire.

Destin was contemplating the possibility that the Engodith had their own motives. But that was not in keeping with the typical Engodith 'modus operandi' or 'profile'. They were not motivated by political ambition or malice. They were professionals. This was their business. It had been, for thousands of years, the core foundation of their culture. Even their religion reflected this fact. Their old gods were gods of secret death. If they had ever had any conflict with the Empire, they had kept it to themselves. They were not on the Empire's list of potential enemies. In fact it was rumored that several Emperors, including Makras the Optimaliser himself, had regularly employed them in the early years After Optimalisation (A.O).

No, Destin was becoming less and less convinced that it was in fact an official Engodith 'hit'. He was favoring, more and more, the possibility that a few rogue Engodith had been hired by someone. That or they had taken it upon themselves, with motives that were as yet incomprehensible to Destin. He never left out the possibility that he himself had failed to recognise something. Something the most talented intelligence analysts, and yes, even P.R.O.P.H.E.T had failed to note. Some new connection between previously un-connected elements. Some new pattern that was just beginning to develop. Some new relationship that had just come into being. Some new 'twist' to an existing phenomena. Some new set of meanings that had just emerged.

Destin was becoming more and more convinced that the only way to get to the heart of the matter would be to go straight to the source. First to King Aitah. Then to the Engodith. He was not satisfied to rely on his intelligence sources. He was not going to leave it to P.R.O.P.H.E.T. He was going to take matters into his own hands. He needed to see Aitah's face when he confronted him. He had to be able to gauge his reaction personally. And then he would take whatever convictions he formed from that interview with him when he faced the Engodith council.

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And what about the 'secret' meetings he had been having with Renshaw? As far as Renshaw understood it, the whole 'set-up' was part of the 'qualification' testing that O.P, as a Makras Clone and potential new Emperor, had to undergo. But more than that he could not make out. He of course felt quite proud of having the trust of Commander Destin. He wanted to impress him. Commander Destin was more of a father to Renshaw than any other adult male in Renshaw's life had ever been. He had kept his promise of patronage, as his training alongside O.P had proven. He had sponsored him for enrollment into 'The Guard' cadets, which he would take up as soon as he had finished his 'basic' education with O.P. He trusted Commander Destin implicitly, and would never for a moment have thought of betraying his secrecy. However at the same time he felt that he was betraying O.P's implicit trust in him.

Luckily up until now there had been no real conflict of interests. Renshaw had never felt that anything he had withheld from O.P would have been considered by O.P himself to be a betrayal. However things had begun developing in a direction that placed him more and more in a position where he felt compromised. Either he would be betraying O.P by concealing something, or he would be betraying Commander Destin by revealing it. Either way he couldn't win. And Renshaw was not at all comfortable in this new position.

Who was he kidding? The real betrayal he felt had absolutely nothing to do with Commander Destin and his secret meetings. It was something much huger than that, from the perspective of best friends. He kept telling himself that it couldn't possibly be defined as a betrayal at all, really. O.P and PRI had never actually been more than friends. PRI had been merely 'playing a role' all along anyway. And O.P hadn't even spoken about her at all since they had begun studying together. Yet somehow it still had felt like a betrayal that afternoon when he had, well, 'bumped' into PRI.

The thing was, Renshaw knew how much O.P idealised PRI. For O.P PRI was not just a flesh and blood and hormones girl. No. O.P had made her into some sort of ideal of a girl. Later, after some 'hand' and a few orgasms, after they were completely relaxed, Renshaw had brought up the subject with PRI. Her response was quite mixed. On the one hand she appreciated the 'romantic' notions of people on Earth. In some ways they were quite pretty and charming. However they were based on notions of ownership and control. Worse, the sort of ideals that O.P had of 'love' and 'romance' tended to place the supposed 'heroine' in a sort of prison. They subjected her to all sorts of controls and limits that no free person would submit to. They all smacked of slavery. And of course this aspect of O.P's idealised romantic feelings towards her made her feel terribly uncomfortable.

No girl she knew would submit to any sort of 'monogamy'. No girl she knew would allow any boy to get away with 'idealising' her. It was a form of violence that had been done away with millennia ago. He was going to have to get over himself! He was going to have to evolve! In fact in the end she had built up quite a rage over the subject. A rage which pushed her hormones through the roof again, and left her once more clambering over Renshaw's muscled torso, to feel his smooth, warm, silken skin sliding across hers, as he used his fingers and mouth to please her. And as he pleased her, she pleased him in the same manner. Reciprocity was important to all relationships!

Renshaw was sure that PRI would never understand how he could possibly feel 'guilty' about those satisfying hours they had spent together in the private room of the local 'bump' club. She came from a completely different culture. One that had its definite benefits, as far as Renshaw was concerned. But still he was sensitive to O.P's feelings. He couldn't help it. He realised that as far as everyone was concerned, he himself had done nothing wrong. So why did it feel like he had done something wrong. And why was it that he felt a compulsion to tell O.P all about it?

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Sure, his counselors had been explaining it all to him over the last few sessions. They had explained to him how he had grown up in a culture that had yet to free itself of its oedipal guilt. That guilt had supported millennia of perverted religious ideas. Humans attached a sense of guilt to everything sexual, and to many other things merely associated in their minds with gratification per se. That guilt derived from the infantile guilt associated with the desire that their competition for their desired sex object, their mother or father, should 'disappear', so that they themselves could replace their mother or father in this role.

It was a bit hard for Renshaw to quite 'get', but he thought he more or less understood that it was a neurotic guilt. One that was not valid. Just a remnant of infantile pre-rational experiences. Still, he felt uneasy about it all. He would prefer to 'have it out' with O.P once and for all. Just to clear the air. If O.P wanted to 'clobber' him, then he would take it. It would make things easier. Anything was easier than the feeling that he had betrayed O.P, and that one day O.P would find out. The point was, his friendship with O.P meant a lot more to Renshaw than a few hours of hot sex with PRI.

But then it occurred to Renshaw, that if this was in fact the case, then why didn't he just satisfy his needs with any of the other girls who had 'chosen' him on Bump? Why was he still seeing PRI, of all the girls available to him? When it was the source of so much drama? Could it possibly be that he, Renshaw, had romantic feelings for PRI? Feelings he was in denial of? Feelings he would not admit to himself?

O.K. It was great sex. But that was easy to get on this planet. No-one had to go without. That's what made it all the more weird that O.P went without, as far as Renshaw could tell. And the only reason appeared to be his idealisation of PRI. His wanting to 'keep himself' for PRI. But then why didn't he just go out and get PRI? He easily could have done so many times already. PRI was a natural, healthy girl with a healthy, natural sexual appetite. O.P was every bit as attractive as Renshaw. Surely PRI would have selected his face and body during one of her 'bump' sessions. And surely O.P would have recognised her face during one of his. And he certainly would have selected her body as 'highly desirable' during a search. She had such a perfect body. On earth she would have been a super model or movie star. Here she was just another healthy, active, happy, girl. So why hadn't he?

Renshaw felt a little anger rising in him. Ironic, he thought! He was angry with himself. He was angry because he felt guilty when he really had no reason to. But he was also angry with O.P for not being 'normal' and just 'going for it' and enjoying himself like any other teenager. It would have put Renshaw out of his own misery.

But then, Renshaw corrected himself, O.P wasn't just any other teenager, was he? He was a Makrus Clone. He was potentially the next Emperor, with an entire galaxy of responsibilities awaiting him. And between that and now lay a long series of complex training and testing.

Chapter Twenty Three: We demand our birthright back

The group assembled at the mountain retreat on the Narshall Peninsula were a mixed lot. They did not particularly like one another. In fact many loathed each other. Many despised one other. Most had contempt for each other. They had no sympathy for one another. They did not give a damn about each other's welfare or well-being. They felt themselves to be in a constant state of competition, of battle, of conflict, with each other, and the world.

And what were they fighting for? Freedom? Justice? Beauty? Truth? No, none of that. They were merely fighting for power, status, wealth, privilege, and as big a piece of the

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pie that they could get their hands on. No matter that they had already had their fill. What they wanted. What they needed. Was more. Always more. It was a sickness with them.

They shared little in common. Ultimately the thing that had brought them together here, the only thing that all of them could agree on, was that they did not like sharing anything.

Their only shared interest was, ironically, self-interest. The one thing that they did share in common, was a sense of entitlement. They each considered themselves particularly special and merit-worthy. They each felt that they deserved more than anyone else. More status. Special privileges. Yes, for they were special individuals. They were better than everyone else. They had proven their superiority over and over again in their particular fields. Some were musicians. Others scientists. There were many 'entrepreneurs'. There were also of course the usual run of politicians, lawyers, advertising executives, and 'business' people.

They knew that before Optimisation, people like themselves, with their superior talents, abilities, beauty, and intelligence, had enjoyed massive privileges and power. They had belonged to the 'beneficiary classes'. They had ruled over the masses. They had enjoyed every imaginable luxury and satisfaction. The idea appealed to them. To their selfish egotism. For human nature had never been completely tamed. It was egotistical and self-delusional at heart.

You could socialise and condition people from birth to be more considerate, compassionate, caring, empathetic, and ethical. You could educate them on the costs of excessive selfish egotism, and benefits of moderating our desires and demands, and redistributing windfall profits gained by chance, or through the luck of holistic inheritance.

But ultimately some people would just not accept limits to their egotistical impulses and desires. They would seek to claim more than was their right. They felt a sense of entitlement to more. And they did not find any compelling reason to moderate this feeling. They had grown up in a safe, caring, friendly, compassionate, reasonable, nurturing environment. They had never had any personal experience of war, poverty, hunger, rampant mutual opportunism, or even unmoderated envy, jealousy, and malice.

They imagined that they were superior to the elites of the past. They had messed things up because they had been incompetent. The new lions imagined that they themselves would be able to avoid all the pitfalls of history. They would do a better job of it. They would bring back the Golden age, and somehow avoid all the horrors that, to their mind, inexplicably repeated themselves over and over, as each new generation imagined that it too, like them, could do better than the previous one, only to find itself once more trapped in the same nightmares.

They had learned the wrong lessons from history, from their history lessons. They had looked back over the days before Optimisation, and rather than see how the desire to exploit and reproduce inequality had led to unimaginable horrors such as war, even torture, and the grinding misery of poverty and exploitation, often to the extreme of virtual, and even official slavery, all they had seen were the lifestyles of excessive luxury, privilege, and power that the beneficiary classes of those times had enjoyed. They glossed over all the suffering and misery of the masses, and the ultimate fall and destruction of the elites themselves. Instead they became fixated upon the grand, elegant, free, satisfying, rewarding, exciting, exhilarating, leisurely, brilliantly shining lifestyles of the beneficiaries of that form of social organisation had enjoyed, as long as it had lasted.

They were part of a small but influential political movement whose only common purpose, whose single policy, credo, or manifesto, was to be allowed to return their own

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planets back to the days before Optimalisation. The days when inequality of holistic inheritance could be opportunistically exploited to accumulate massive privilege, wealth, power, status, and self-indulgence. Only, if, of course, you were lucky to be born into the most fortunate, elite, families at the very stop of the socio-economic-status pyramid.

Or if you were lucky enough to have been born more intelligent, more talented, more beautiful, more, well, anything desirable, than almost everyone else. Then you could opportunistically exploit your good fortune. You could convert these gifts into wealth, power, and privilege. You could use them to climb your way to the top of the pyramid, over your competitors, as you fought to propel yourself up into the ranks of the elites.

In what to these people's way of thinking had been a 'golden age', you could take any of these inherited personal qualities and leverage them into massive personal benefits. You could join the 'beneficiary' classes. Those people who took as much as they could for themselves, without consideration for the costs other people would have to pay. Well it was only right, wasn't it? I mean, if nature had not wanted these individuals to enjoy massive benefits at the expense of the 'masses', then why would nature have given these individuals such unequal gifts? Such good fortunes? Such fantastic holistic inheritances?

It only stood to reason, in their minds, that it was nature's will that the 'best' should enjoy 'the best' of everything that life had to offer. They had been selected, by fate, to stand out from the crowd. It was nature's will. It was, well, if you liked, 'God's' will.

Yes, these people often spoke of this ancient, mythical character from the old superstitions that had infected the millennia, the aeons, before Optimalisation (B.O). One of their goals was actually to re-instate some form of those old fantasy role playing games that had been known, B.O, as 'religion'. They had been going through all the historical archives of their home planets, hoping to reconstruct a new religion that would serve the same purposes for them, as the old, B.O religions had served for the old beneficiary classes, B.O.

From what they understood, this thing known as 'religion' was a pre-requisite foundation stone for any society that was to be based upon the opportunistic exploitation of extreme inequality. Any society that was directly or indirectly based upon any form of 'slavery'. You needed religion to make mass slavery, whether the mere virtual slavery of debt-slaves and wage-slaves, or the official, legal slavery that preceded this form of slavery, work. All the socio-historians had been clear on that point. It made the masses submissive to the will of the masters. It made them accept their slavery as natural, normal, as the will of this 'God' character.

This religion was a terrorist organisation that threatened the masses with 'fates worse than death' for either rebelling against the masters, or worse, killing themselves. Fail to submit to your master's whims, and you would suffer an eternity of pain, suffering, humiliation and misery. This was the negative motivation to conform to the wishes of the masters, and their agents, the educators and social conditioners, the Priests.

But negative motivation has its limits. To really encourage enthusiastic participation, you needed to be able to offer some benefits. Preferably benefits that cost the beneficiary classes nothing. So to positively motivate the masses to voluntarily do even more than the minimum required of them by the masters, and to get them to comply and submit even when the master or his agents was not watching, not overseeing, not supervising them, these religions promised the masses a great reward. A 'heavenly' reward. Either in some fantastically enjoyable other world. Or on a world just like this world, but where they all got to enjoy the lifestyles of Kings and Queens.

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In some cases a new-incarnation on the same world, but as a member of the beneficiary classes they had spent their lives slaving to make satisfying and rewarding for. They were told that this was how the members of the current beneficiary classes had earned their current privileges and benefits. And so this legitimated the inequality in the eyes of the 'faithful believers'. It was not that the victim was any better than the perpetrator. It was just that one had earned the right to be master, and the other had either behaved badly in past lives, and was being punished for it now, or they had simply not worked hard and long enough to earn a new-incarnation into the beneficiary classes, yet.

Select members of the beneficiary classes played a special role called 'Priest', in these religions. The priests carried out mesmerising and satisfying rituals, and gave 'sermons', through which they conditioned and primed the masses, from birth until death, to submit to the Beneficiary classes rule. And their rules. They taught the masses the doctrines of sin and karma, and the blessings of hard work, sacrifice, sweat, and toil. They taught them that it is good and right to go to war. They taught them that women were inferior to men, and should submit to their husbands and brothers, and any other male. Of course this appealed to most of the males. So the Priests had automatically won over half the population.

It was this group that glorified the oppressive, horrific past, and considered itself the legitimate rulers of the present, that was plotting to undermine the status quo. To overturn the thousands of years of slow, hard, incremental progress that had been achieved in the years after Optimalisation (A.O). If not throughout the entire Galaxy, then at least upon their home planets. Yes that was their dream. A return to that 'golden age' before Optimalisation (B.O), when a person could prove their worth, and then take it, and keep it, and pass it onto their own children, without being called 'selfish' or 'greedy', or 'anti-social', let alone 'criminal'.

Of course their real chances were very low. But it was precisely this sort of challenge that had inspired the great individualists before Optimalisation (B.O), wasn't it? All the great characters they spoke about at their meetings, and in their secret journals and net-casts, were opportunistic egoists. The characters that inhabited their very own fantasy role play games all sought their own good, exclusively and excessively, even at the expense of the good of others. Even to the point of imposing lives of misery, suffering, and exploitation upon these others.

The characters that these people glamorized as heroes in their fantasies, at their political meetings, and in their manifestos and writings were, in the context of the Post Optimalisation institutionalization of justice, equity, and 're-distribution' of excessive good fortune, would be considered anti-social, even criminal, to both public opinion, and the legal system.

These people would secretly admire the 'selfish', 'destructive' characters in the 'morality plays' about the aeons before Optimalisation. They would envy them their self-indulgence, self-assurance, self-aggrandizement, and self-praise, even as the rest of the audience in the holo-theaters and live plays would loathe them, using their actions to teach their children important lessons about how NOT to behave.

They believed that it would be easy to convince everyone else, their inferiors, that they too were special. That they too were being denied what was rightfully theirs. To instill in them a sense of entitlement equal to their own. Despite the fact that they knew that the masses would never be able to match them in the competition for status, power, wealth, and privilege. They could disingenuously exaggerate the chances the masses would have of ever satisfying this newly re-established sense of entitlement, once the competition, the game, the race, the struggle, had begun in earnest.

They had come to understand that the secret to making inequality popular was to trick the masses into believing that they too, each individual in the mass, were better than

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their neighbors. Superior. Rightful, natural, inevitable members of the new beneficiary class.

The secret was to deceiving people into believing that they too were being kept back. That they were being kept down from achieving their true potential for greatness. If only they would be set free to achieve these potentials, they would be able to show everyone. For didn't everyone, secretly, at some level, consider themselves better than everyone else? That something was keeping them back, somehow conspiring to stop them rising to fulfill their grand illusions about themselves? The new lions simply had to feed this pride. This self-deceit. This conceit.

The new lions would simply fill the masses with unrealistic hopes, dreams, aspirations, and expectations that each crumbly little individual would be able to rise to great heights, to express their own true innate greatness, leaving everyone else in the dust. Then everyone would see them shining, flying high, like fireworks, soaring like eagles. Then they would see them looking up meekly towards them as they celebrated their unique special superiority. They would live it up while all those who had previously dared imagine themselves to be their equal, let alone their superior, would produce all the value that they consumed. They would live as the beneficiaries of inequality. They would be the crypto-slave masters, like those great men and women in that B.O 'golden age'. They would take their rightful place as members of the beneficiary classes.

Their psycho-historians had explained many things to them about human nature. About how easy it was to exploit human nature to your own personal advantage, once you understood it. And the first thing to understand was that everyone imagined that they themselves were naturally superior. More worthy. More deserving of more privilege, more consumption, more power, more status, more respect, more attention, more, well, of everything good and desirable. People would happily give up the relative equality of the A.O era, with its security and 'fairness', in return for the chance to show everyone just how superior they are, and in the process enjoy all the benefits of massive inequality. Very few people, their psycho-historians explained, considered themselves as the equal to anyone.

Everyone felt superior, in their own minds. Thus everyone would imagine themselves as the beneficiaries of massive inequality. Very few would ever imagine themselves as the 'losers' in such a society. It was just a matter of offering them the opportunity. But there was the problem. Post-optimalisation controls and social management had eliminated any opportunity to exploit excessively good holistic inheritances for private, personal gain.

This was the most glaringly obvious in the case of the Emperor-in-waiting. O.K. Officially she had already been rejected from the running. But who were they to say? How dare they imagine that they had the right to judge her! Who were these testers? Were they clones of Makras? By what authority could they reject her? Her, who carried within her all the genetic qualities of the great, legendary Makras?

And so it was she who, the ironically individualist clone, who, among all those present, had the most to gain. And she would, she had promised herself. When she became the new Empress, no matter what the selection panel had decided!

But how were they to re-educate the masses? How were they to over-ride the thousands of years during which Makras' Eden Protocols had become institutionalized, revered, honored, and respected?

That was the challenge. And of course, human nature being what it is, these exceptionally talented, gifted, intelligent, beautiful, and competent individuals all believed they would find a solution. They were, after all, superior. If they were going to be deserving of the re-construction of that 'golden age' where the few, like themselves,

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would enjoy luxury and ease, paid for with the sweat of the masses, then it was time to prove themselves worthy of it. It was time to find a 'solution' to the 'problem' of Makras' 'Eden Protocols'.

Of course it would be remiss of me if I failed to remind those readers not completely familiar with the galaxy, that the Marshall Peninsula is located on Algodon. You know, King Aitah's planet. That's right. And special guests that night were a few of the Priests who were not at all happy about recent 'revisions' to their 'holy scriptures'. You remember, the ones which had become more inclusive and permissive. To the point of legitimating some very highly un-orthodox prophets. Prophets of, gag, peace, justice, and equity.

Had these Priests been compelled to attend the seminars compulsory for all students on Eulin, including the one on 'Religion and it's legitimation and reproduction of the opportunistic exploitation of inequality', rather than understand the sobering message, they would have come anyway with delicious visions of 'what if'. What if they could use that same power to control the masses? What if they could return to that 'golden age' where Priests ruled with 'noble lies' and enjoyed 'the best of the best' of everything? Oh what a lovely dream. What a paradise, for Priests.

The 'what if' being the resurrection of the pre-optimalisation days, the pre Eden Protocols ages, those 'golden ages' when a priest could manipulate the masses Oedipal complexes and superstition, their belief in and desire for the 'intercessions' of angels and gods, and enjoy some real power and privilege. The days when they were the intermediaries between these angels and gods. What a lovely position to be in. So much power. So much wealth. So many privileges.

After most of the participants had gone back to their home planets, to the realities of the A.O galaxy, dreaming of a return to the 'good old days' before optimalisation (B.O) two people remained behind to plot and scheme. They were the only two people in that galaxy with the real potential to actually resurrect that 'Golden Age'. And they were determined to realize that potential. To realize their dream.

King Aitah was pleased to announce to the former potential-Emperor (Empress) -in waiting that they had just received news of a great success. One more step forward had been taken in their quest for control. One more 'obstacle' to their desires had been removed. One more 'objection' overcome.

The plan to blackmail O.P's trainer place a tracker on O.P, by kidnapping her son and holding him hostage, had appeared to have been successful. The 'tracker' had been placed on O.P. Now it was just a matter of waiting for the best time to 'eliminate' this potential obstacle to her Emperor-ship, and their plans. Somehow O.P had escaped the renegade Engodith 'hit' on Earth, but his luck could not hold out forever. Things were looking more favorable with every passing minute. All the best Intel had placed O.P as her greatest potential rival, and thus the greatest potential threat to their plans. With O.P out of the picture, nothing should stand in their way of ushering in the resurrection of their new golden age. With them as the new Emperor and Empress. Imagine, Makras twins, sitting side by side on the throne. What could be more glorious?

Chapter Twenty Four: There is a time for talking, and a time for taking action

At the same time as this group of self-obsessed individualists are dreaming of a return to their own 'golden age', far across the galaxy another individual is bringing his own long planned schemes to fruition.

P.R.O.P.H.E.T Ghost in the machine

A very determined and highly energised looking speaker has taken over an assembly of parliament with his elite 'storm troops'. Thousands of politicians and members of the public sit in the vast arena as he takes the pulpit, the president having been taken to the side by the new-comer's own escort of militia and armed guards. They are all strangely attired. They look so...so...well...science fictionary.

'Ah, I see it. I FEEL it. Your contempt for me. You despise me. You HATE me. Yes, no need to voice your malice.' He addresses the representatives, who are all outraged at his nerve, as if he could even imagine ever managing to pull such a coup off. They are confident now, that this stunt cannot hope to succeed. And now that their initial shocked fear has worn off, they are becoming angry. But this confidence won't last long. And the anger will quickly be replaced by terror.

He continues. 'Yes, that's all for the good. For I would never trust a man who was not almost universally despised, hated, mocked, mobbed, victimised, and outcast by the majority of the people. For a man who cannot, simply by being himself, enrage his neighbor to spasms of envious, malicious, violent hatred for him, an overwhelming desire to 'cut him down to size', is no man that I want to be mistaken for'.

'Good afternoon, elected representatives of Earth. Now how you came to be elected, well, that is past history. No comment on a particular representative's 'campaign financing' or another's 'illegal arms dealings'. No. We don't have the time to go through the whole list of crimes and self-serving, opportunistic acts. The stinking, rotting, corruption. The vile deceit and deception. I could stand here and go on for days embarrassing all you so-called 'Rep-re-sen-ta-tives' with your criminal dealing. The general corrupt tone of this whole place. Sickening. And this mockery of a political process. Absurd. It would be funny if it wasn't so ugly.'

'Democracy'. He utters the word like he is spitting out a distasteful, loathsome insect that had crawled into his mouth. 'Doesn't work, does it? Human nature is opportunistic. Give it an opportunity, and it WILL corrupt any system of government. Any, that is, except *dictatorship*. It has done so. We could sit here all day and go through all the facts and figures I've collected, through my network. But you wouldn't listen. I'd end up wasting all my valuable time, energy, and money in years of legalistic maneuvers and the bad guys would mostly walk away with a slap on the wrist. Who's going to blow the whistle on the guy in front of them, when they know that they themselves will be the next in line? Hey?

'And don't get me started on the legal system. Set up by the beneficiaries of corruption and crime. How could any *sane* person *expect* it to be any less corrupt than it is? What is the basis of your legal system? Your courts'. He nearly spits that last word out with utter contempt. 'Yes, I am in contempt of court! Contempt. That is all it is worthy of. A bunch of morons want me to leave justice in their hands? 'Smug, complacent, arrogant, conceited fools!'

'No. I am a *sane* man. I would never attempt to deal with such a system. No. A *sane* man will see this system for what it is and simply *bypass* it. This is what I am doing. This is what this little'.... and with this he waves an arm around the room encompassing his own troop of rebels, and the entire assembly, ...'show here is all about.'

'I am offering you an alternative. Yes you can chose. Between this'... at which he holds up a big red button... 'and me, as your rightfully elected dictator.'

Of course everyone's gaze was fixed upon the device in his hand. A small flat device with a big red button. 'Oh, this?'. 'Yes, I guess I should explain. You deserve an explanation. But, wait, why waste words on people who do nothing BUT waste words. Words and resources. And lives. And opportunities to actually do GOOD. Better to give you a little demonstration.'

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The entire assembly is watching with bated breath as he turns the large dial on the device. and then ostentatiously compresses it. Suddenly all around the audience people are shocked and horrified as their neighbor's heads explode, spraying blood and brain matter all over their faces. The speaker then continues.

'Yes, so. Quite vivid graphics. People respond well to graphics, don't they. Not like arguments. People don't care for arguments, do they>. No matter how compelling? Am I right? Do I have your attention?

He then paused a moment, just long enough to change his posture and tone slightly. 'You see all of you have had some sort of surgery in the last 10 years. You know, dental, cosmetic, hair implants'. Everyone was looking about themselves at their neighbors, everyone reflecting back a barely controlled level of sheer terror. It was like terror looking into the mirror and seeing terror reflected back.

He gave the terror a few moments to unfold and blossom before continuing. 'And those of you lucky to not have needed such 'improvements', well, you'll probably remember, ironically, a few days you *CAN'T* quite remember so well? Right? A bit of a black-out? The drink affected you more than usual? An invitation to a nightclub, resort, or hotel for some fun? And the next day things were a bit of a blur? Woke up with a bruise at the base of your skull?' Throughout the rapt audience hands were reaching out and lightly fingering the area at the base of their skulls, half expecting to find some sort of scar or even device just below the surface. Around these people spaces suddenly formed, as the others unconsciously backed away from them.

'Well, you see, I took the opportunity to implant little high explosive devices. This here.' He is holding up the device. 'See this little remote control here? With this I can select teeth, neck, implant, and if I like, well, I can even dial in a person's name, such as....' he waits for effect as everyone is suspended in horror, fearing that the next words he would speak would be their name, or the name of a loved one. Or even the name of someone standing next to them.

And then he utters a name. 'Representative Sawdon'. He casually types in the name as the people around Sawdon suddenly clear a large area around him, leaving him alone. He is shaking. His eyes are filled with terror. His face shows every sign of the fear that is welling up within him, and seeking its expression. His mind is racing, searching for some way out of this nightmare. But it cannot find any escape. The speaker directs his gaze and voice directly towards the lonely, terrified Snowdon. Snowdon reflects on how he, personally, has been responsible for sending thousands of 'enemies of the state' to be tortured. And tens of thousands of young men and women to be maimed or killed in battle, while killing and maiming 'enemy' women, children, and men. He is not so sure at this moment that all that suffering really was done in the name of a 'Just Cause', as the operation's official code name supposed. Snowdon imagined that he was now going to pay for his role in that bloody slaughter, violence, cruelty, suffering and misery. So he was a little taken aback by the speaker's next words.

'Ah, I see, Representative Sawdon. 'Now how's the beef industry been treating you? The man is trembling and terrified, begging the speaker not to kill him. 'Ah, well. So you see. I'm not a CRUEL man. I guess you get the point. No need to get all dramatic and over-reach myself. No My Sawdon, go along, and get along, and you'll be fine. Only first thing you'll be doing when you leave today is beginning a plan for the veganisation of agriculture, WON'T it, Representative Sawdon?' You now represent truth, justice, and freedom from slavery and violence, don't you? You no longer represent the beef industry do you?'

At this the man began yammering 'Yes, yes, yes, of course, yes...' in a broken voice full of fear and acquiescence. A voice overflowing with gratitude and good will towards the man who was now sparing him his life.

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The speaker then turned towards the large entry hall as a group of television camera operators is lead in by some of his own 'security personnel'. He smiles at the camera. 'So, all in favor of me for President, say 'Yes'. The crowd roared its acquiescence. 'Good, good. Now go home and clean yourselves up. Call your lobby mates and tell them you're in a new line of business as of today. As of today you serve the *public* interest, and not *their* narrow vested interests. Not their petty financial and egotistical ambitions. Not your own personal interests for power, wealth, and self-aggrandizement. And let your mistresses and girlfriends know you'll be busy for the next few weeks. We've got a busy work schedule ahead of us'. I doubt your wives expected to see much of you anyway.

'Oh'. He turned to face the cameras, speaking to them as if they were the members of the various branches of the military, and their commanders. 'Just a quick note to all the members of the armed forces and police, I have a special setting here just for you. Don't lose your heads now'. He paused, smirking at his own joke, before continuing. 'Be reasonable. Accept the changes. At least give me a chance to prove my competency? Yes, I think Admiral Speasy and Field Marshall Romelly will see my point. And the rest of you are bound to follow orders, if I am not mistaken? Military oaths and all that? Right. So I shan't be expecting any trouble. Good. Now lets get to work, shall we. Earth needs you!'

Chapter Twenty Five: Escape and evasion: field training

Commander Destin had put both O.P and Renshaw down for the various modules of 'field training' that all prospective Imperial Academy trainees were required to undergo. O.P, as a potential Emperor, was expected to undergo all the highest levels of military training, and Commander Destin had made good on his promise to sponsor Renshaw, sponsoring him for training for the Imperial guards. And so the two young men remained together, despite the apparently huge gap in their future destinies.

Part of their training in 'escape and evasion' involved trying to avoid detection by the intelligent surveillance systems that operated on every planet inside the Imperium. O.P and Renshaw both welcomed this change from the grueling routine of school lessons.

The first part of the training module involved more classroom lessons. They learned how the facial recognition systems worked. They required a 35% profile. They operated by calculating a set of 'numerical facial indices'. These included distances between the eyes, the angle of the nose to the eyes, and so on. It was these data that were stored in the massive P.R.O.P.H.E.T data banks. When potential matches were found, by comparing the observed indices with the data banks, they were processed by more complex expert systems. These systems compared actual faces. And then any potential matches were sent to human operators for final verification.

But the systems were much more sophisticated than simple face recognition. They also carried out 'gait' analysis, voice analysis, and even pheromone capture. They used lasers to calculate 'body temperature maps'. There were a whole host of ways and means the authorities could use to identify citizens. Of course all this assumed that the motivated citizen could remove the 'chips' embedded in their necks. These contained all their personal data. It recognised that citizens could have their retina's replaced or manipulated, and could undergo plastic surgery to prevent the facial recognition systems from successfully identifying them.

The basic principle was anticipation of all possible eventualities. Failsafe upon failsafe, built into the system. This was the operating principle of all the systems that Makras the Optimiser and his specialists had introduced.

P.R.O.P.H.E.T Ghost in the machine

Each time criminals had found a way to evade the recognition systems, the authorities had employed a new form of identification. There were so many potential 'signatures' to choose from. It was just a matter of identifying them, and operationalising their measurements for field use. Some 'signatures' were known to the public, but most were not known.

This of course made it harder for potential 'criminals' to adapt to. They could never be sure which of all the possible measures were actually being used. You could only counter a security measure if you knew what it was. Every technological measure ever employed in the B.O era had spawned its own counter-measures. Often with surprising speed. And so the authorities had learned that for a security measure to be effective, it had to rely on mostly unidentifiable elements. Obvious, public, overt measures were good deterrents for the general public. However to be effective, the real key elements had to remain unknown to potential 'reverse-engineers' and 'hackers'.

Once O.P and Renshaw had successfully completed the theory part of this course, they were sent for the practical part of their training where established field operatives would clue them in on all the tricks of their trade. And this is where the real fun began.

The operative O.P and Renshaw had been assigned really truly *loved* her work. She had originally trained to become an actor. However the competition being so fierce, she had decided to diversify, just in case that final 'break-through' never actually came. And then she developed such a passion for her new 'safety-net' career that over time she forgot about her dreams of stardom, as she immersed herself in her craft.

Her original acting training proved very useful in this career. She had learned how to adopt a new persona in actors' school. She had been quite good as an actor, and she found a great deal of satisfaction in passing on all she had learned. Her students were trainee Imperial secret service operatives.

She had even occasionally been involved in direct field work herself, putting her acting skills to the test. She had played all sorts of roles in this capacity, and it had been very fulfilling. Perhaps she would never gain the stardom and everything that went with success as a film actor, but she didn't mind that so much. For she felt that she was putting her skills to their best use in serving the Imperial government. She felt she was making an important contribution to the galaxy. And that more than made up for any of the 'perks' of stardom. Not to mention the fact that this job had its own little perks.

Like how many stars got to meet Emperors, well, proto-Emperors, first hand? Let alone train them? Destin had seen to it that the boys got the best trainer there was, and she took pride in his obviously high esteem for her.

As part of their lessons, O.P and Renshaw learned how to use dental prosthetics to change the lines of their jaws, chins, and teeth. They learned how to speak with different accents, tempos, intonations, and registers. They learned how the use of special 'orthopedic' shoe inserts could change alter your knee, hip, and back alignments, and thus dramatically change your stride, gait, and posture. They were shown how localised anesthetic patches could be used to put particular muscles temporarily to sleep, and thus change the way you walked, talked, stood, and even sat. They were given special ointments and tablets which could slightly alter their 'signature' hormone balances and pheromones just enough to trick the measurement systems. They were shown where they could inject cortisone to produce localised swelling in key points of the face, thus changing their 'numerical facial indices'. They were taught to eliminate their usual personal habits, diet, and gestures, replacing them with new ones, in order to avoid these 'signatures' giving them away.

When O.P and Renshaw had been given the full 'treatment' by Justine, their trainer, they could hardly recognise themselves. It was a real 'hoot'. But after a few hours they

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experienced quite a lot of discomfort from all the 'inserts' and injections. It was exhausting keeping up the 'mask' of a fake 'persona'. Physically, and even more so, mentally. But Justine was very pleased with them. She could report to Destin that they were making great progress, and would be ready for their 'practical' exams in a week or so. They just needed some 'fine tuning' and practice, and she was sure they would 'pull off' the illusion of their 'new personae', and successfully complete their 'escape and evasion' training.

One of the biggest obstacles to any 'deception' in the galaxy was P.R.O.P.H.E.T. It was the galaxies universal data base, communications hub, and financial transactions system. It contained every piece of information about every citizen. It 'knows' where every citizen is at every moment. Satellites and security cameras could provide real-time monitoring of anyone, anytime, anywhere in the most populated areas of the galaxy. It allowed for complete transparency and oversight. Of course this system was only made viable A.O. Before Optimisation such a system would be too risky. Too open to abuse. Too prone to opportunistic exploitation.

If you had been defined as a 'person of interest' to the authorities, any time you performed the simplest financial transaction, a complete 'data packet' of your appearance and so on was 'captured'. It was compared to the data base, and if there were any serious 'anomalies' between the stored information and the current 'snapshot', your information was passed onto field operatives for closer scrutiny. For any conspicuous 'deviations' from the stored data were considered suspicious.

The centralised banking system made it impossible to buy anything, from a train ticket to food, without being immediately identified by the system. As there was no way to 'trick' the P.R.O.P.H.E.T financial transactions system, Imperial field operatives were taught all the psychological tricks of convincing people to voluntarily help them, giving them things they might need. It was much easier to fool, manipulate, and motivate people. And of course when that failed, they could revert to simple, old-fashioned, theft. They were taught all the 'sleight of hand' tricks of pick-pockets and con-men.

O.P and Renshaw were also taught how it was possible to identify people they themselves might be after, even in a large crowd, by simple holistic clues such as their gait, the way they walked and held themselves, and any physical or behavioral characteristics peculiar to themselves. For each individual was unique in some way. It was explained to them how our unconscious mind often identifies people long before we consciously realise why we are already looking at a particular person. This is based on 'holistics' which are very subtle.

They were also taught to use official 'profiles' to identify the best place to begin searching for a 'person of interest'. They learned how famous criminals had been caught with clever ruses. Even 'Bump' had been used to draw famous 'persons of interest' to desired locations. One famous criminal had been lured to a small shop on the pretext of that shop just having received a shipment of their favorite, very rare and hard to find, coffee bean.

'The key to 'sleight of hand' is to distract your target audience', Justine was saying, suddenly directing her gaze across the room. Her two student's gaze automatically followed, for just a second. For just long enough for her to complete her little 'magic trick'. When the two returned their gaze, they were amazed at the apparent 'magic' trick that Justine had just completed. 'See', she crowed with playful joy. 'Gotcha!' 'Agents have managed to walk straight by the most elaborate security systems just by distracting its operators for a moment. In that moment you have to act completely naturally, and with confidence, and make your move. Allow no hint of anything untoward, and you will not draw attention to your 'play'. Remember that all our security systems work on 'checks and balances'. They WILL catch you out.

P.R.O.P.H.E.T Ghost in the machine

But will they catch you out BEFORE you have made your move? That is the key. To stay on the move. Move from one 'game' to the next seamlessly. The system WILL catch you. But by that time you will have moved on. As long as you keep moving you will evade it. Remember you can only count on temporary evasion. So your evasion will be one never-ending series of little evasions. And remember, that as long as you remain in the Imperium's territory, it WILL eventually catch you out. It IS failsafe. And this is why, if you need to remain 'out-of-system' for any length of time, your best bet is to get out to the rim, just outside the Imperial jurisdiction.

This is why you have been receiving training in a number of trades and skills by which you can earn your way in places where you can not access your Imperial credits. Either because they have been blocked, or because in doing so you would give away your location.

'Barter has always been very hard to police and detect. And so there is always the possibility of offering your services in return for things your need. The people who will employ you will of course exploit your situation. So you won't feel bad stealing from them to make up the difference between the value you provided and the value they gave you in return!' At this the two noted the hint of a sly grin creep across Justine's face. O.P caught Renshaw's gaze and they smiled to each other. But then immediately a very serious look took possession of her features. 'Sometimes the ends justify the means. It is simply a question of judgment and character. I am sure I can rely on you two never to take advantage of my training for unethical purposes'.

And so it was that Justine went out 'into the field' with O.P and Renshaw to observe them, give feedback, and de-brief them. Often Justine could barely keep from laughing out loud, as a hapless 'victim' reached out for a drink or snack they had just placed beside themselves, and found themselves grasping nothing but thin air, their tasty treat having just been 'appropriated' by one of her students.

Even funnier were the confused, astonished, and questioning looks that appeared on a 'victim's' face after placing recently nearly full cups of juice up to their mouths, to find them nearly empty.

Justine could not help but sympathise with those poor people who would suddenly find themselves swarmed by security personnel after O.P and Renshaw had used their I.D's to enter or leave some building. Now that the person was officially 'outside' or 'inside', their presence set off all sorts of security alarms, most 'quiet'. At the same time Justine had to admit that it was at times quite amusing. There was something 'slapstick' about it. She would often catch herself smirking or smiling involuntarily. It was funny, she had to admit to herself.

This was a nice change from her ongoing worries about her son, Jamie. After placing the 'tracker' on O.P, he had been released and returned to her, unharmed. He seemed to have treated the whole thing as an exciting adventure. But Justine just couldn't stop worrying about what they might do next. She found it hard to leave him with his carers, and to return to work. But this work was really important, and Destin had personally vetted the security personnel who were now protecting him around the clock. Justine knew that you could not control everything. 'Life is risk'. She had read that somewhere. If you tried to eliminate all risk, you ended up destroying the things that made life worth that risk.

It was curious to her how many people suddenly appeared quite guilty looking. 'Exactly what was it they thought security had caught them out at?', she wondered to herself. She got the definite impression that the average person had a few more secrets than she had previously assumed. And she was glad of the fact! Glad that there were still mysteries. Still adventures. Still secrets. Still little peccadilloes to be discovered. Even in this most controlled of societies people managed to have their little secrets. It made

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these people so much more human in her eyes. And this little self-realisation startled and slightly alarmed her. That she should like people more for their little imperfections, rather than feel any sort of moral judgments.

But she was too busy to linger too much on these little epiphanies. For keeping up with her two prize pupils was becoming harder, as they, as good students, began surpassing their teacher.

And so it was that on one particular day that the two finally eluded her. It would prove the most fortuitous of events. Even on that day, no-one had yet had an inkling of the plot that was unfolding around them. Justine had just congratulated herself on the way her students had managed to evade even her. She had the total security apparatus at her disposal, and yet they had simply vanished off the system. They were, for all intensive purposes, at least temporarily 'invisible'.

'Where had they gotten to? Where were they? What were they up to? Would they appear at the next moment right beside her, as they had in the past? Justine half expected to turn to find them standing right behind her, laughing at her. However it would be a very long time before she would see the two again. And in this time the greatest changes in their lives would take place. Changes in the lives of the whole Imperium.

Chapter Twenty Six: Operation 'one step ahead'

Now the way Deacon had explained it, someone had placed some sort of Nano-device inside O.P.'s brain? As unlikely as it seemed to Renshaw, Deacon was sure that someone was actually able to 'read' O.P.'s mind. At least at some level. Deacon had been thin on details. They were rushed for time. But the gist of it was that O.P could not be allowed to know that they knew of the threat to his life. O.P could not be allowed to know anything about any sort of plan to get him out of the galaxy. For once O.P knew, then those who were tracking him, and conspiring to kill him, would also know. Renshaw was not sure if Deacon had meant that they could read his audio and visual nerve inputs, more or less what O.P heard, and saw, or actually read his thoughts. He would see about filling that gap in his understanding at a more opportune moment. One in which O.P's life was no longer in danger. Maybe Deacon had exaggerated for effect? In any case Renshaw was clear that there was no way to inform O.P without informing those out to get him. And so he would have to keep the whole operation secret. Secret from Pauline. Secret from O.P. He would have to wait until they were out of immediate danger before being able to share the burden of this information with O.P.

The date was set for the last day of their 'escape and evasion' field training exercise. The plan had to be so secret that Destin could not even use any of his official resources. They were going to have to 'wing it' alone. They could only hope that O.P and Renshaw would prove as resourceful as Pauline's praises had indicated. They would need a lot of luck to pull this off. They were on their own now, at least until they reached their destination.

Destin had ensured that O.P and Renshaw's training exercise would take place the day of the departure of a private charter which was scheduled to leave for Schoenen. Destin had left no 'ether trail' for anyone to follow. He had done all his field work 'Old School'. The only people who knew about this plan were Renshaw and Destin himself. It was up to Renshaw to 'just happen to be' in the right place at the right time, and to somehow smuggle himself and O.P onboard, without even O.P suspecting his motives. Only after they had cleared Galactic space would Renshaw be able to let O.P in on the plan. Deacon had made a great deal about this. Renshaw had not followed the details, but he

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had understood the importance of clearing Galactic territory. It had something to do with the range of of the electro-magnetic spectrum the tracking device and Nano-tech senders worked within.

Renshaw could not let O.P suspect a thing. He had to somehow get them both into the embarkation dock where the luxury cruiser bound for Schoenen was undergoing its pre-flight maintenance. Then he had to somehow make it seem a good idea for them both to pass as mechanics, in order to gain clearance into the secure area, and then to quickly transform themselves into members of the cleaning crew that were scheduled to carry out the last pre-flight sanitary protocols. Pauline had taught them that the easiest ways into any secure area were to act as the lowliest of service staff, doing the least sexy of jobs. For this was the weakest link in the security net.

People paid the least attention to cleaners and sanitary workers. Most companies employed agencies to take care of these low level jobs. And the agencies tended to treat their workers badly, leading to a high staff turnover. And so few of the supervisors would be surprised by 'new' faces suddenly appearing among their 'crews'. Few would even care. Most were actively looking for other jobs, and paying this current one as little attention as they could get away with. They were concerned only that their job should get done without any 'problems'. And so O.P and Renshaw quickly adopted the demeanors of dissatisfied manual workers, and slipped into the luxury liner quite unnoticed.

O.P was enjoying the fun of the adventure so much that at first he never wondered why Renshaw was so keen on getting on board. It was only later that he became curious. For now he was just going along with Renshaw. In any case he was too focused on the moment to moment demands of the situation to have much room to spare for any speculations in that direction.

As soon as they had gained access to the service areas of the vessel, O.P and Renshaw, true to their training, quickly changed personae and sought out a new 'role' to play. They passed what appeared to be some sort of laundry, and quickly changed into what looked like the fleet line's own uniforms. They were careful to pick uniforms of the lowest grade of personnel. Their choices quickly proved felicitous, for as they exited the laundry they were passed by gangs of similarly dressed people pushing large metal cabinets on wheels. Food was being loaded into the kitchen areas, and so O.P and Renshaw suddenly became the 'kitchen hands' that their chosen uniforms suggested they were, grabbing the wheeled trolleys and following the other 'kitchen hands' down into the bowels of the ship.

Renshaw decided that this 'cover' would be a good one, after the other 'kitchen hands' seemed to accept him and O.P quite readily. Soon they were working hard unloading foodstuffs into the huge kitchen pantries. They were then sent into the kitchen to help with some basic food preparation. They had chosen wisely. Low level kitchen hands were not expected to have any special skills, and O.P and Renshaw easily managed the tasks given them. In fact they were working so busily that they didn't even notice that the ship was preparing to depart until they were called up into the service areas to 'buckle up' for take-off.

At this O.J gave Renshaw a startled, questioning glance. 'Did Renshaw really mean for them to actually leave the planet on this ship? Surely that was taking the exercise a bit too far? But then again, surely that was the whole point of the exercise, wasn't it? To escape and evade. They had certainly evaded all day. And so why not go the full distance and escape as well', he thought with a smile that he shared with Renshaw. He couldn't wait to see the look on Justine's face when she found out!

Once the ship was out of the planet's airspace and at cruising speed, all the service personnel got out of their harnesses and went back to the work they had been doing.

P.R.O.P.H.E.T Ghost in the machine

O.P and Renshaw were working with a friendly bunch of people, many of whom chatted away amongst themselves in a language O.P could not quite make out. It was not simply 'slang'. One of the first of the protocols that Makras had introduced had concerned language. All peoples of the empire were to adopt one common language. At first they would use this language alongside their local languages, as a second language. But within a few generations it would become the only language in the Empire. It had even, through a process we don't have the time to follow here, even become the most common language on Earth.

And so you can only wonder at O.P and Renshaw's surprise to be overhearing what appeared, for all intensive purposes, to be a completely new language. 'But of course', Renshaw thought out loud, before realising it was still too soon to give O.P any clues that might give away their plan, and then merely thinking to himself, 'They are Schoenen!'

'What?' O.P queried. 'Of course *what*'?

'Oh, nothing', Renshaw tried to reply nonchalantly. 'Just thinking out loud'. He was desperate not to allude to anything to do with their destination. But he had almost done so. He was thinking quickly of how to change the subject when a really cute girl came over to them, and asked if they would help her for a few minutes. Renshaw grabbed the chance, eluding O.P's questioning glance, and replying 'Of course', as he returned her smile and followed her, gesturing for O.P to do the same.

'You two temping?' She directed the question to O.P, who had little time to consider what she might mean. Renshaw was a bit quicker in his understanding, and replied, as if making a joke 'Is it that obvious?' The girl gave him a friendly smile, but then returned her attention to O.P. Renshaw saw that the girl obviously had a 'thing' for O.P, and so he kept out of the conversation as much as he could, encouraging O.P to interact with her, with suggestive looks and gestures.

'Well. Yeh. Um. Did we miss something?' O.J offered by way of response to the girls smiling anticipation.

'Don't worry. Nothing important. It's just that you didn't respond to our invitation a few minutes ago. Either you were deaf, or not Schoenen.' She smiled that ever so inviting smile at O.P again. O.P wasn't sure what it was an invitation to, but he was quite interested to find out what, if she ever offered him the chance!

'You got it in one. Nope, not deaf' O.P was naturally inclined to say more, but remembered his training. 'Say as little as you need to, that was you are less likely to give away something without realising it', he heard Justine's voice repeating in his mind.

'Ah, some fresh blood. Always welcome here. It can get a little boring, just the same old Schoenen faces day in day out. Don't be shy now, if you have any questions. I doubt they gave you much training at the agency. Don't worry. We've had quite a few temps lately. It seems the lure of space travel isn't enough to get us Schoenen off our comfortable planet any more. Seems we've become afraid of a little hard work. But hard work never killed anyone now, did it?' As she said this the warmest smile spread across her cute face, making her lovelier than any girl O.P had seen for some time. In fact it was the first time he had looked at a girl in that way since PRI. He suddenly felt a desire to get close to this girl, and to find out more about her. He tried to remember if anyone had addressed her by name.

She seemed to sense this, and offered him her name, with that same entrancing smile. 'My name's Fay, I am working my way through chef school. This is just a temp job for me too, in a way. So we're more or less in the same boat, I mean, ship...' she broke off with an enchanting little laugh.

P.R.O.P.H.E.T Ghost in the machine

O.P almost forgot to offer his own name, and then sort of stuttered. 'O.P. My name's O.P'. He just stood there glowing and smiling like an idiot. But he was not self-conscious of this fact. All he had a mind for was the stunningly beautiful girl in front of him. She had gone from very cute to breathtakingly adorable in the time it had taken for her to introduce herself. There was no explaining it. O.P was simply, well, smitten. This was the first real crush he had had since PRI. He was so high on the feeling he had no awareness of anything else but her. And anyone observing the pair could hardly have failed to miss the mutual nature of the attraction. There was no doubt that Fay returned his feelings. Sparks of electricity flew between the two so strongly that Renshaw almost expected some alarm to go off somewhere.

Renshaw was glad. He was glad for his friend. But to be honest he was at least as glad for himself. For once the burden of guilt that had been weighing him down about PRI was lifted, and he could breathe freely again. He wondered if now that he and O.P had escaped, Destin and Pauline could now be together as a couple. He wanted them to be happy. Everyone deserved to be happy, didn't they? And suddenly Renshaw felt feelings that had been hidden deep inside him come up to the surface. Feelings, of, well, love. Love for PRI. They caught him by surprise. He had always thought of PRI as just a bit of fun. Now it was clear that his feelings for her were much more 'Earthly' than he had allowed himself to realise. But he knew PRI. She was definitely very A.O. And these feelings Renshaw had for PRI were definitely very B.O. He wondered what was to become of them.

While he was enjoying these private thoughts he put off, for the moment, all thoughts about how they were going to get off the liner once they landed. Just then he felt a vibrating in his jaw. It was the communicator that had been implanted there. He closed his eyes, allowing them to become accustomed to the dark before the images that Renshaw anticipated would materialise upon his retina. And then all at once it was as if Destin and Pauline were standing before him. Pauline was smiling and appeared relaxed and happy. Destin appeared to be his old self once more. It was a refreshing return to the good old days for Renshaw, and he felt a smile grow across his own face.

'Well done Renshaw. You certainly 'passed' with flying colors', Destin applauded Renshaw. We had to wait until now to contact you. We have also contacted the Empire's liaison in Schoenen, to make sure you have no problems disembarking. Someone will make themselves known to you at the space terminal, and we will take it from there. You have done a great job. I am proud of you...' For all the world Renshaw was quite certain that Destin had been about to say 'Son'. Renshaw felt like a good son, being congratulated by his loving mother and father. It was a novel feeling for Renshaw. He had never felt that before. Destin didn't need to finish his sentence. Just the way Pauline and Destin looked at Renshaw spoke volumes. It said all the things he had ever wished his own parents had ever said, but had failed to say. For once in his life Renshaw suddenly felt completely at ease. Completely accepted. Fully approved of. He felt he was O.K. Anyone watching might have noticed a slight but significant change in his bearing. His posture. The way he carried his head. The way he walked.

If O.P had not himself been lost to the world in his hormone induced ecstasy of romantic love, he surely would have noticed it.

Chapter Twenty Seven: Back-tracking

As soon as Destin was sure that O.P and Renshaw were safe on their way to Schoenen, he turned his attention to finally eliminating the threat to their lives. Deacon had worked his magic and reverse tracked the tracking device back to its 'geoloc', as he

P.R.O.P.H.E.T Ghost in the machine

called it. It's 'geographical location'. Destin was not surprised to find it to be on Algodon. He was not surprised at all until he arrived there.

For who should he find upon landing on the Peninsula and entering the palace? Not just the King himself. That was what he had expected to find. No, what he had not expected to find was a proto-empress, one of the female Makras twins. And looking quite guilty, if he were not mistaken.

P.R.O.P.H.E.T had suggested King Aitah as the most likely threat, even though P.R.O.P.H.E.T could offer no reasonable motive. But now the pieces of the puzzle all fell together. For while King Aitah alone had nothing to gain from O.P's death, the proto-empress certainly did.

For a moment Destin reflected on the problems with Eugenics, and cloning. While this young woman appeared to be very much a feminine, female version of O.P, she had apparently inherited a very different character and personality. How much her environment was to blame, and how much embryology, Destin could only speculate. He would leave that question for other psycho-historians to answer.

The data that his optic and aural transponders were picking up, more or less what he saw and heard, were currently feeding P.R.O.P.H.E.T with data. P.R.O.P.H.E.T had already alerted the most elite of the elite about this state of affairs, and was running profiles and tracing data trails. It would soon find all the pieces of the puzzle, put them together, and produce a holistic 'meaning' from the data. P.R.O.P.H.E.T would trace all in and outgoing communications relating to the proto-empress. It would input all the data it could find, in order to 'make sense' of this connection between King Aitah and the proto-empress.

But Destin would be way ahead of its final 'recognition'. His instincts had yet to be matched by any software! While P.R.O.P.H.E.T was analyzing the proto-empress's body language, facial gestures, thermo-scans, pulse-scans, pheromone releases, and every other indice which could be used to 'judge' mental state, emotional disposition, and a host of other 'signatures' which could be used to infer what a person was thinking and feeling, Destin had already formed his impression.

She was guilty. She was in cahoots with King Aitah. Somehow she was using him. And from what Destin could tell, King Aitah had no idea that she was just using him as a pawn in her own grab for power. What she had offered him Destin could only guess. But the way King Aitah looked at her, his body language, and his gestures, Destin figured that the King and the proto-empress were more than just co-conspirators. She was 15. He must have been three times her age. And yet if Destin's instincts were right, and they usually were, then there was some sort of real relationship here.

All these impression fleeted across Destin's consciousness in the blink of an eye. During that same moment Destin had noted a number of potential threats, and had activated his suit. This proved felicitous, as in the next instant a number of projectiles bounced off his force field, falling harmlessly to the floor.

The sources of these projectiles were immediately 'neutralised' by the rest of Destin's storm troop. They used pulse weapons which left their victims semi-conscious, but unable to move at all.

King Aitah laughed didn't even flinch. He was supremely confident. You might say smugly complacent. He had no fear of Destin and his team. 'You have no jurisdiction here, Commander Destin, isn't it, If I am not mistaken'. 'I am sovereign of this planet'. And of course I need not introduce you to your proto-Empress, the lovely Corrina?

P.R.O.P.H.E.T Ghost in the machine

P.R.O.P.H.E.T was doing a final run-down of the data connections between King Aitah, the proto-empress, and O.P, in the context of some more general political questions, as the King said this.

Just as he finished this final run, P.R.O.P.H.E.T reached a startling 'nexus' of conclusions. It sent these to the high council of advisors to the Emperor, and the Emperor herself. For only this group of people had jurisdiction over a Makras twin. And only this council could take the steps required for acting against another sovereign. And the conclusions that P.R.O.P.H.E.T had reached would require both.

P.R.O.P.H.E.T had inferred the highest crime of all. Treason of a proto-empress. Conspiracy to murder another Makras twin, and to seek to seize control of the Galaxy for herself. The motives were as yet a little vague. However P.R.O.P.H.E.T would soon fill in any blanks in the equations, and supply the 'big picture'.

Destin was relayed an 'enablement protocol', the highest legal authority possible in the galaxy. This allowed for him and his team to take the King and the proto-empress into custody aboard his ship, for the trip back to Eulin, where the Emperor herself awaited them. The protocols allowed them to override all the normal diplomatic considerations relating to such personages as the proto-empress and a sovereign king.

Destin offered the holographic protocols to the two, who were now stunned into silence, at least for now. 'If you please, your highnesses', Destin bowed slightly and indicated for the two to walk with him back to his ship. King Aitah graciously bowed to his proto-empress, offering her his hand, as they turned the walk back to Destin's ships into a royal procession. Destin was slightly in awe of their supreme self-confidence. It was as if they could not even imagine that anything could possibly hold them accountable. They radiated a sense of self-entitlement Destin had never encountered before. It was as if they just assumed that the universe existed for their own personal benefit, and would certainly never allow anything to happen that might inconvenience them.

Chapter Twenty Eight: Living in Ma-at

As Destin and his team were 'escorting' King Aitah and the proto-empress back to Eulin, O.P and Renshaw were preparing for their landing on Schoenen. Fay had found places for both of them with her team. It seemed to Renshaw that O.P and Fay were really hitting it off. He was glad for O.P. It was about time O.P realised that there was more than one girl in the universe worth his attentions. But Renshaw wondered if this time O.P would be a bit more relaxed about the whole thing. And what were these Schoenen girls like anyway? Schoenen was not part of the galactic federation as such. It was one the only independent planet inside the galaxy. He wondered what it would be like. What would the people be like?

Just then Renshaw received a data package courtesy of Destin. It was a P.R.O.P.H.E.T holistic overview of Schoenen, the planet, its people, their history, and their customs. O.P and Fay were chatting away, and so Renshaw pressed the pressure sensitive implant in his jaw, manipulated the 'display' as he had been taught by Destin, and sat back and enjoyed the 'presentation'.

Renshaw had to keep reminding himself that everything he was watching was generated by the implants stimulation of his optical and aural nerves. He was seeing and hearing things like in a dream. Though while in a dream it was the brain that produced the stimulation, in this case it was the implant. And so Renshaw found himself inside the presentation most of the time. He was watching events take place as if he were actually there. And it was a fascinating place to be.

P.R.O.P.H.E.T Ghost in the machine

Schoenen was, ironically, the first planet to adopt something like Makras' 'Eden Protocols'. Thousands of years before Makras in fact. Thousands of light years away from Eulin. At a time when there was no technology anywhere in the galaxy that would have allowed even for radio transmissions to pass that distance.

It seems Schoenen had its own version of Makras. A leader who had come to the same conclusions as Makras would, only thousands of years later. Schoenen had a continuous documented history longer than any other planet in the galaxy. At some point in time a religious order had emerged which had captured the imaginations of a small group of people. They fell in love with its simple teachings. These teachings known as '*Living in Ma'at*', were attributed to a pre-historic character who had at first been ascribed all sorts of super-natural powers. He was said to have been the most beautiful. The strongest. The most talented musician. The greatest sportsman. The most noble. The most fair. The most generous. The son of a fabulously powerful king, he had left the palace behind to live a simple life among simple people. At first they thought him mad, for he would spend his time just sitting, wandering, and thinking.

He wandered around the planet, asking questions of every person said to be wise. He spent years in different monasteries, practicing the disciplines of the monks there. Almost on the verge of giving up on his quest for wisdom, having found nothing worth living for, he is said to have sat down on the edge of a cliff. A waterfall passed by his feet. It was hundreds of meters high. Mist from the waterfall would often drench him, but he did not move. It was said that he had cleared his mind of all desire. He wanted nothing. He sought no more. He had become empty.

Then one day a small child had wandered off from his family. Its mother was desperate with fear for her beloved. The family arranged a search party to find the child. And then they found the child. It was sleeping in the lap of the now virtually lifeless King. The group assembled around the man and child, amazed by the spectacle. It was just then that the King opened his eyes to find the group around him. He looked down at the child. He looked at the group. He smiled. For he had had an epiphany at that moment. He knew what it was he had to do. He knew for certain the way forward.

The family accepted him as some sort of holy man. They fed him and cared for him while he regained his strength. That child never left his side. That child became his first disciple. The village was known as On No-one alive really knew how such a humble village could become associated with the all-powerful Sun. But soon other disciples came to listen to the King. And then members of the royal court heard about the wisdom of the man at On. They first sent their own servants, then their scribes, and then they came themselves. And because of the impact this holy man had on them, they eventually sent builders to build palaces where they could stay during extended visits, and listen to the holy man. They had schools built where their own children could be taught by the holy man and his growing band of disciples.

These disciples soon became known as 'The Priests At-On'.

And the village soon flourished into a noble city. A city worthy of its name. 'The City of The Sun'. The principles the holy man had taught became known as the 'Atenic' doctrines.

These Atenic doctrines were very simple. He taught that all things were made up of sentient energy matter. Everything was alive. Everything was conscious at some level of its being. Everything was alive. The way to happiness was through truth and beauty. When you found the truth of a thing you found its beauty. And vice versa. He taught that humans should respect all other life forms. Never taking a life unless it was necessary. Always treat all things as ends in themselves, and never as mere means to your own ends.

P.R.O.P.H.E.T Ghost in the machine

He taught that to seek happiness by having more than others was doomed to produce constant conflict, jealousy, and envy.

He taught that there are no gods. No angels. No priest can seek intercession for anyone from any god or angel. Everyone is equally capable of realising their own godhead. Therefore no real Atenic priesthood ever developed. The Atenist's often became teachers, but never considered themselves to be any different than their students. Merely a little more enlightened. They sought no power or wealth. They built no temples. They built schools. They built houses. They taught that there are no special sacred places. Only sacred acts. And these are those acts done for the good of another. Those good acts motivated by good will are sacred. Prayer should be action.

The presentation went forward to show how this group of Atenic types soon spread out over the planet. They were a peculiar lot. At first the locals they met thought them simple-minded and mad. For they never asked for anything, but gave everything they had to anyone who asked. Many in fact starved to death. The locals simply took advantage of them. But the thing that impressed many of the locals was that the Atenics seemed to be very happy, even as they were starving. This attracted a lot of followers who had been dissatisfied with their lives. Often very wealthy, powerful people would join them, giving up all their possessions, and seeking the happiness they saw in the faces of these Atenic individuals.

Their numbers grew. However over the history of the planet there were many famines. The followers of Ma'at often died off in large numbers, not being willing to deny any food they had to others who were starving. But again, this impressed their neighbours, and drew even more followers.

Of course not all the inhabitants of Schoenen shared the sort of nature that would embrace such self-denial. Not everyone saw the point. But among the most powerful and wealthy there came the recognition that the Atenic individuals had the highest ethics, and could be trusted with the most important responsibilities, without fear of them being corrupted or opportunistic.

And so over time the Atenic, though a minority, came to be placed in all the highest positions of authority and power. They were the judges. They were the doctors. They were the highest government officials. They were the solid foundation upon which Schoenen society would develop.

They were the most creative people in the galaxy. They operated on the principle of 'try and see'. They respected failure as much as success. They saw failure as the necessary step towards success. They sought the optimal way of doing anything. It was their motivation. They never sought personal power or wealth. They merely sought the optimal. It gave them great pleasure to help others.

When this group finally formulated their system of ethics, it included Eugenics. But the bulk of the population was against the idea. And they had no luck explaining the benefits to them. The ethics were too high for the masses. And so they had begun secretly implementing their plans. They accepted the responsibility. They did not take it lightly. But they felt compelled.

And so a time followed when the bulk of the population found themselves infertile, unable to produce their own children. Society was adapted to 'share' the children that were born. These children were, by clever management, mostly the offspring of Atenic individuals. They shared the Atenic nature. And so over generations the entire planet became predominated by that Atenic nature. Though of course embryology meant that many of the children were quite different from their parents, the bulk of the children were much more Atenic than previous generations in nature.

P.R.O.P.H.E.T Ghost in the machine

Before the technological advances on Schoenen began, the cultural advances were well underway. Their society avoided most of the evils that other societies had to endure. There were no wars past a certain point. And so no investment in war technologies. There was not much genetic inequality, and a very little social inequality was possible. There never developed a culture of entitlement and exploitation. There never was any slavery. As the culture became more advanced and industrialised it avoided most of the problems other planets went through, such as pollution, overpopulation, and environmental degradation.

Technologies were only sought which served the real good of the people. Present generations always considered the interests of future generations. Businesses and enterprises were set up to produce real value for the people. Creative, physical, and mental work was all valued equally. As soon as the technology allowed, many jobs were automated and adapted to robotics. All products were designed to be as easy to maintain and recycle as possible.

There were no lawyers as such, for the legal system was designed to produce justice. This was probably a first in the galaxy. On most planets legal systems had been engineered to allow the rich and powerful to be free of any accountability, while making it impossible for the poor to ever gain any justice.

The planet had only one bank. One central financial transactions hub. Every transaction went through it. It would have been impossible to hide a transaction. That made corruption virtually impossible, even if anyone thought to engage in it.

As space travel developed around the galaxy, Schoenen came to hold a special place. The people of Schoenen were the definition of honesty and reliability throughout the galaxy. Their products did what they claimed. Their financial system the most secure. Their reputation for being incorruptible led to many of the first 'leagues of planets' to place their headquarters on Schoenen. They were often host to trade negotiations, peace talks, 'think tanks', and trade shows.

Because of its involvement in major peace talks, Schoenen began accepting political exiles. It found that many dictators and leaders were willing to accept peace treaties if they had a safe haven to escape to. It was not an easy decision for Schoenen, to accept into its society known war lords, despots, and dictators of other planets. It was made on the simple condition that anyone living in Schoenen had to live by its rules, or they would be exiled back to where they came from. Seeing that where they came from, most of the worst people would have faced terrible fates, those often nasty political leaders who sought refuge on Schoenen often soon proved very productive, peaceable members of society. And in accepting these people, Schoenen often prevented wars from continuing on and on, with all the horror and cruelty this would have meant.

One thing of course captured the 15 year old Renshaw's attention. The sexual mores of Schoenen. Now it seems that they had been well ahead of Makrus and his optimisations in this area too. For sex was considered purely recreational in Schoenen. It had been for a long time. Sex was for pleasure. It had had nothing to do with reproduction for the last 2000 years. Reproduction was planned. As in Makras' optimised galaxy, sperm were 'harvested' from male children as soon as they became fertile, and they were then sterilised. Every child born was planned, welcomed, and forward-resourced. This meant that every child had the best chances of experiencing a satisfying life. Children were treated as more or less 'everyone's' child. They enjoyed many parents and carers. They all received the same love, attention, acceptance, approval, and access to opportunities and resources.

Sex was as natural a social pleasure as eating in public might be. As no-one had to go without, it was never a problem. Few people would take much notice of people

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engaging in sexual acts in public. No more than if someone decided to have something to eat in public.

The people of Schoenen had a reputation for being the most beautiful in the galaxy. For beauty was one of the main criteria used in the Eugenics programs. Everyone recognised that to be beautiful, and to be admired, and desired, added greatly to any person's quality of life. And so most people were beautiful, but galactic standards. And those who were not so physically perfect often enjoyed the positive attentions of others simple because they were novel and different.

People were not concerned about reproducing themselves. They felt an obligation to the not-yet-born-persons to ensure that they had the best holistic inheritances possible. Also most seemed to really believe in what became known as 'The Optimal Ethic Generator'. Yes, the very same concept that Makras came up with quite independently. People took for granted that they would be reborn on the planet, and could be reborn as any living thing on it. And so they respected the rights of all living things, and only reproduced those forms which they considered offered positive life experiences. They considered all living things to be 'experience engines'. For that was the basic premise of the Atenic religion from the beginning. That life was just a game that we made up to enjoy. And all forms of life were merely vehicles for experience. Experience engines.

'So, I guess that at least answers my questions about Fay!' Renshaw thought to himself as the presentation continued.

The presenter explained how originally the sexual liberation was a result of the Atenic teachings. For the Aton's held onto no property. And to avoid sexual jealousy and envy, they simply gave into any sexual urge as it occurred to them. They never refused sex to each other. They believed that if you satisfied your sexual desires, then you would not enter into relationships with ulterior motives. You would be able to trust people more, if you could be sure of their real motives.

They were voluntarily sterilised before becoming Atenic priests. The people's they lived among accepted this custom in the Atenic groups as part of their religion, and it was tolerated. And of course over time as the Atenic way of life came to dominate the Schoenen society, it became the norm. It was considered natural and normal for people to simply give in to their sexual urges, as long as it did not interfere with their work, or public safety.

The abundance of opportunities for sexual expression meant that rape was unknown on Schoenen. They never even coined a word for the concept. When they first met with the concept in other cultures they were shocked. They could not understand how it could happen? How could anyone be so desperate for sex that they would need to force someone else to have sex with them?

Lots of things that were taken for granted on other planets were viewed with unbelieving horror by the Schoenen peoples. Like sentient beings eating other sentient beings! Like humans enslaving other humans! Like humans treating other animals, and even other humans, as mere means to their own ends! Like letting everyone reproduce, no matter how bad a holistic inheritance they had to offer their offspring. Like allowing a few people to amass a huge amount of power and wealth. Like war. The list went on and on, Renshaw found.

All in all, it seemed that Schoenen society functioned so well because it was based on sound principles. Simple principles that everyone acknowledged and accepted. There was little need for policing. Cameras kept track of everyone's actions, so you couldn't lie about what you did or didn't do. Other technology, like on Eulin, would reveal your intentions, if you tried to lie about them. So few people would even bother considering

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lying to anyone. And as for denial, lying to yourself, it was considered the worst fault imaginable.

People accepted that human nature was opportunistic. And so opportunities were eliminated. There was little opportunity for lying, stealing, cheating, or corruption. You couldn't accumulate massive wealth, and you couldn't concentrate it in your family by passing it onto your children. For the whole society owned each child.

So people tended to choose jobs and professions that really suited them. The pay was pretty much equal. You were paid during your training and education phases in line with the effort required during them. Studying and training hard was considered a job like any other. Effort and sacrifice like any other. So of course you would be paid for them like any other. The most undesirable jobs were 'rationed' so that everyone had to do their fair share, and seek ways to improve the working conditions, and to automate the production processes.

There was zero tolerance towards all forms of violence, whether verbal, physical, psychological, financial, even 'bureaucratic'. This last was a category they introduced soon after State Bureaucracies came into existence on the planet. So there was no 'insolence of office', as one poet had once put it, on Schoenen.

From the very beginning the Atenic individuals resisted any attempts at forming groups, monasteries, or fixed churches. They worked together on projects, and by pure chance, however they had no hierarchies, no dogmas, no rituals. They sought merely to 'live in Ma-at'. To live in truth, justice, and beauty. To make each of their actions and thoughts consistent with these principles. To act as role models. They wore no special clothing. They bore no special marks. And yet almost anyone could spot an Atenic individual at first contact. It was something about how they bore themselves. Their posture. They radiated calm, ease, and trustworthiness. They came to occupy all the most important positions of power well before contact with other planets.

And once space travel had advanced to the point where planets were dealing with each other on a regular basis, as trade partners, Schoenen quickly became the location of choice to do business. The Schoenen could be trusted implicitly. There had never been any breach of confidentiality. Some planets had even tried by force to compel Schoenen to reveal business, military, or financial details of rival planets. However there was no known case where they succeeded.

They were of course vegan. For they would never condone enslaving any animals, nor using them as means to their own ends. Most of the ethics and taboos Makras introduced as part of his 'Eden Protocols' had been introduced on Schoenen so long ago no-one could really imagine how other planets could possibly be so cruel.

The presenter noted speculations by some that the Schoenen had indeed sent emissaries to other planets. They went as 'teachers'. And so many believe that it is possible that Makras came into contact with some of their teachings. Anthropologists found an amazing co-incidence of ideas between the religions of many planets, and the concept of 'Living in Ma-at' of the Aten. Specialist psycho-historians considered that the principles of the Aten were so simple, that they were bound to emerge among people on different planets. What made the difference was the socio-historic contexts they appeared in. In most times and places, the culture quickly attacked such ideas as heretical. Those who taught such ideas were often tortured to death. They were forced to endure 'fates worse than death' in order to act as a deterrent to any future would-be reformers. For in most cultures the priests had the most power and wealth. And that wealth depended on keeping the populations ignorant, fearful of the gods, and beholden to the priests to act as intermediaries, to sooth the angry gods, and to ask them for favors.

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The presenter went on to explain how many of the Schoenen, when they first heard about Makras, and his teachings, his 'Eden Protocols', considered him to be some sort of 'Avatar'. A more enlightened being who incarnated as a human in order to share their wisdom. Thus he was known simply as 'teacher' among the Schoenen. Though he enjoyed other epithets too, like 'Makras the holistic optimiser' and more simply, 'Makras the Kind'. His 'TROONATNOOR' works, 'The Reality Of Our Natures And The Nature Of Our Realities', were often compared to much older Schoenen concepts of 'SATYA'.

Then an individual appeared in Renshaw's 'mind's eye'. It appeared to be one of the Atenic teachers. This inference proved correct for he went on as if giving a lesson. He was explaining some of the commonest faults of reasoning. In one part of his 'lecture' he explained how the senses, rather than facilitating perception, actually acted with the reverse effect. For they limited perception. It was this that made possible the experiences we had. These experiences included 'The world' as we experience it.

Renshaw was a bit puzzled by what he might mean. The 'teacher' went on to explain how all reality was one big 'sentient electro-chemical soup'. Our sense of individuality was constructed by limiting our perceptions. It made it possible to have experiences per se. For to experience something it first had to be 'other' and 'not you'. And so the illusion of 'not you' is produced. However in reality we are all one. It is just an illusion that we are individuals. It is a necessary illusion in order for the 'game' of life to be 'played'.

He went on to say that death is merely the lifting of this veil of illusion, the closing of this 'individuating sense of differences'. At death all the senses, and their limits, are removed. To us it looks like someone has died, and lost consciousness. In fact they have gained full consciousness of the true reality, the one-ness of all, the unity of everything. As such death is a return to god-head, to one-ness, the elimination of the senses and their limits, their 'you and I and it', their 'not-I', their curious otherness, their potential for knowing. Death is the elimination of the illusion of self as other, and other as not-self. When you know all, everything, there is no motive, no desire, no experience.' Renshaw didn't know quite what to make of all that. But it sounded interesting. He would definitely try to find out more on Schoenen.

Finally, at the end of the presentation, Destin appeared. He appeared quite happy to see him. And Renshaw was of course happy to 'see' Destin. Destin explained to Renshaw how he had arranged 'sanctuary' for himself and O.P on Schoenen.

'Oh, and you can tell O.P there won't be any more secrets.' 'We have neutralised the threat'. 'I cannot stress how much you have impressed me. It must have been hard keeping secrets from O.P. You won't need to any longer. I will explain everything to him myself. Enjoy Schoenen. I hear it is a lovely planet. Really beautiful women', Destin smirked as he raised his eyebrows. This was the first time Renshaw had seen him in such a good mood. And addressing him with such a level of casualness. Not at all like the slightly distant, stiff, and formal Destin that Renshaw had become accustomed to.

Then Destin continued. 'I'm going to recommend a 'special merit' for you to the academy. You are going places, my boy'. He smiled and signed off, leaving Renshaw in a bit of a daze. 'My boy', Renshaw repeated in his mind. He savored the sound and feel of that simple utterance. It felt so strangely positive. He had never such a positive relationship with any other adult in his life. He felt a warm glow of acceptance and approval. He felt O.K!

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Chapter Twenty Nine: On Schoenen

The Schoenen media were very excited about O.P.'s 'visit'. Schoenen had immediately offered Commander Destin sanctuary and full protection for O.P and Renshaw, upon hearing about their dilemma. Of course as a potential future Emperor, they had every reason to ensure good relations with him and the Galaxy. But they would have extended this hospitality to anyone who needed it, and was willing to adopt the Schoenen lifestyle.

There was no reason to keep his presence a secret. Security on Schoenen was not an issue. Schoenen was the most peaceful place in the galaxy. This was, ironically, due to the fact that it offered sanctuary to some of the galaxies most vicious ex-dictators and organised crime figures. They came here because they had nowhere else to go. They had nowhere else to go. They would not jeopardize this, their last sanctuary. They had such far reaching connections and influence that they could ensure no-one ever came to Schoenen with bad intentions. Even the worst of enemies from other planets would live peacefully side by side, once on Schoenen. For it was their last resort. And they knew it. And, anyway, life was pretty good on Schoenen, they had to admit.

Violence in Schoenen was a rarity. There were no real crimes to speak of. In fact there were very few laws. The laws were simple and based on principles. Any child understood the legal codes before they reached puberty. Actions were either good for society or bad. If they were bad, then they were addressed. There were no loop-holes. There were no professional lawyers. There were law teachers and law examiners but everyone represented themselves before any sort of trial or investigation. The intent of such investigations was always to find the truth, and the optimal response to the situation that had arisen. People were not punished as such. They might be removed from society if they represented a real danger to anyone, but otherwise all outcomes were aimed at restitution of any damage to victims or society, and a renewal of the persons understanding of and commitment to the laws. People were allowed to 'work off' and damages they had done in good deeds. Nurture and reproduce good nature. Act in good faith. These were some of the basic ethical principles on Schoenen.

The fundamental precept of the Schoenen social system was the attempt to instill good habits in people, while protecting them from their worst impulses. In daily life sobriety and moderation were the norm. However there were special events and places where people could engage in excess for short periods of time, before returning to sobriety. They could, for instance, book time at special venues where they could consume all sorts of drugs for a few days. They would then 'sober up' before going back into the world. They could participate in adventure sports. However most of their 'adventures' were 'virtual'. They would have large scale interactive virtual races in all sorts of craft, on land, sea, and in the air.

One of the first things Renshaw noticed was how much the Schoenen loved nature. They cultivated any natural beauty. As they were flying low into the landing facility, Renshaw couldn't help but notice that Schoenen was covered with vast areas of what appeared to be, well, 'wilderness'. And yet the planet was known around the galaxy for its manufactured goods.

But then Renshaw soon became aware of regularities in what he had first taken to be wilderness. And the more he looked the more 'cultivated' the land actually appeared. What he was seeing was the remarkable level of 'eco-scaping' the Schoenen had done on their planet. The Schoenen had gone well beyond mere land-scaping. They sculpted entire forest areas. They re-routed rivers to produce the prettiest waterfalls and lakes. They went so far as to 'shape' entire ecosystems. This included the animals that inhabited them.

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For Schoenen believed that they might be new-born as any animal on the planet, over an infinite number of random new-incarnations. So they worked to ensure that only species that could live in harmony reproduced. They sought holistic synergies between all living things. They aimed to ensure that their next lives would all be positive, rewarding, satisfying experiences.

They finally reached the landing area, with the city in the background as Renshaw turned away from the holo-screen which was relaying the real time recordings of the cameras in the ships undercarriage towards O.P and Fay. While Renshaw had been admiring the scenery below, it seemed that all O.P had eyes for was Fay. And from what Renshaw could make out, the feeling was mutual.

Just then Fay turned towards him and gave him a merry smile. He returned the smile and then suddenly found himself thinking of PRI. If what the presentation Destin had transmitted to him was accurate, then O.P was probably soon going to be very happy. Maybe it would finally break the PRI spell he had been under. Maybe for once O.P would have a little fun. It would do him good. He deserved it, Renshaw thought to himself. Suddenly Renshaw was feeling very, well, for want of a better description, generous, towards O.P. And then he realised that what he felt was really the lifting of that burden of guilt he had been carrying around. For the secrets he had kept from O.P on account of Destin and the assassination plot. And the secrets he had kept, if Renshaw were to be honest, for his own sake. The one about him and PRI.

They landed with a soft rushing sound, as the contra-pulsion units de-compressed. A few soft announcements indicated that it was now safe to move about, and lights went on and off in sequence, flowing in the direction of the exits. Renshaw was wondering who would be meeting them at the landing area when suddenly Destin appeared in his 'mind's eye'. It was a bit disconcerting. Renshaw was still getting used to these sudden apparitions.

'Good to see we've all arrived in one piece', the apparition said with a smile. I'll hand you over now to Prince Wohlbehagen. He will give you your disembarkation details, and will then be waiting for you. O.K. Over to you Prince, Destin chirped with a smile.

Renshaw couldn't help but notice the huge change in Destin. He was becoming, well, more human lately. He guessed it had something to do with Pauline and the final easing of the whole assassination plot business. It must have really weighed on him. For he had just escaped by sheer luck on earth, and he had been really hard on himself throughout the whole affair. Now that King Aitah and his plotting proto-empress were on Eulin, in 'custody', and Pauline had her darling boy back, it seemed they were one big happy family. Renshaw envied them. He envied their little boy too. More than he would probably ever have admitted to himself. And he couldn't help wondering about O.P too. For he had been taken from his parents. Well, as much as they could be called parents.

Chapter Thirty: Meeting the royal family

The prince appeared just as Destin faded out. He was a very handsome middle-aged man. He had dark hair with just enough grey to appear quite regal, in a very fatherly way. 'Hello my good man. I have the pleasure of speaking with the young master Renshaw?' the man intoned, his voice quite warm, with a very strong hint of 'brassiness' to it. Sort of like a trumpet being blown over a pool of honey', Renshaw couldn't help but thinking. The man had already made a strong, and very favorable impression on Renshaw. He could not say for the life of him why, but he was very certain that he liked this guy.

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'Yes, your, ah, your highness', Renshaw replied, a little hesitantly, not yet sure of how you addressed a real life prince. 'Quite'. 'Good'. 'Jolly good show', the prince countered, in those dulcet tones of his. 'Oh, and I see that my daughter has already introduced herself to our young Emperor, ah, that is, Emperor to be', the prince continued, his eyes moving across to Fay and O.P.

The prince looked toward Renshaw expectantly, as if, well, expecting something. It took Renshaw a moment to work out that the Prince was waiting for him to introduce him to O.P. It was only then that Renshaw suddenly really really 'got' the fact that O.P. was a very important person. And rather than resent it, he felt rather proud that the Prince was asking him to make this introduction. Suddenly Renshaw felt important too. The best friend of a proto-Emperor. Now that was something, wasn't it!

'May I introduce' Renshaw began, with all the formal pomp he could muster at such short notice, 'O.P.', he said as he looked from the Prince to O.P. And now to O.P. 'I have the great pleasure to introduce you to Prince Wohlbehagen', as he moved his gaze from O.P. to the Prince.

The prince bowed slightly 'It is my great pleasure to welcome you to Schoenen, as sorry as we are for the unpleasant circumstances of your trip', he added solicitously. The Prince continued graciously. 'I see that you have already had the pleasure of the acquaintance of my daughter, Princess Faydor?'

With this Fay blushed quite brightly, and O.P. was very taken aback. He had had no idea. He was a little lost for words. But Fay helped out. 'Yes of course daddy. As you know, its impossible to for me to stay away from such handsome young men. They just exert this magnetism on me. I am just a little speck of iron that cannot help itself', she replied playfully'.

'Yes, yes. Quite the little speck. And quite the magnet, if I may say so, your, ah...' the Prince faltered, searching for the appropriate words.

'O.P. is fine. As you know. I am just another citizen. Unless of course the selection panel chose me, for some reason, over the other candidates' O.P. offered.

'Yes. Indeed. O.P. Of course. So. I imagine you are quite tired after your trying ordeal? Yes? Good. Then we shall retire to my lodgings so that you two fine young men can get some rest, and I can catch up with the latest gossip with my dear darling daughter', he returned.

At this the prince turned on his heels and they followed him through the customs area where the customs officials moved to the side and bowed in an ever so dignified manner which lent as much dignity to the Prince as it did to the officials. It was the sort of lovely little ceremony that the Schoenen maintained towards their royal family. More out of a quaint sense of nostalgia than any real difference of power. It was a little play that they all indulged in. Renshaw liked it. He liked the Prince. He liked Schoenen so far.

O.P. was a little perplexed at first concerning Fay. 'Faydor. Princess Faydor', he corrected himself, just as she grabbed his arm playfully, 'somehow letting him lead her as they followed behind her father, the Prince', he thought to himself.

Having grown up on Earth, Renshaw or O.P. had been expecting some lavish palace, with servants, maids, grand staircases and all that sort of thing. The stuff of Old Europe and fairy-tales. What they got was therefore a real disappointment on one level. On another it was completely refreshing. For the 'Royal family' lived downtown in a rather modest, well, town-house. No palace to be sure. But it turned out to be a very cheerful and comfortable home.

For the Schoenen royals were right near the very top of society, to be sure. Only it was a very flat society, as far as socio-economic hierarchies went. Renshaw and O.P. would

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have chosen the term 'middle class' to describe it, if you had asked them. Commander Destin lived in a comparable style. So in this sense Schoenen was, as Renshaw had been informed, very similar to the Imperium. Very A.O (After Optimisation). It was just that O.P and Renshaw had grown up on a very B.O (Before Optimisation) Earth.

Fay looked a little downcast at the expressions on the faces of O.P and Renshaw. 'What is it?' She asked. 'Is something wrong?' 'You look like you ordered fasha and got nasha instead?' She giggled at her joke.

'Huh?' was all O.P could respond. Renshaw was also at a loss for words.

'Ah, don't worry, just an old Schoenen saying', she replied. 'Apparently doesn't really translate well into standard Galactic', or so I'm told,.

Renshaw and O.P smile politely and gave each other slightly embarrassed looks. 'But hey, you speak English', and then O.P corrected himself quickly, 'I mean, Galactic'. He still found it a little odd that the entire galaxy just happened to speak his own language. He had always wondered at this in the old science fiction books and movies. Douglas Adams, the writer, had even invented a 'Babblefish' to solve the problem interplanetary communication. Whoever would have guessed that English was not only the 'International' language, but also the 'Universal language'?

'Well of course silly. All Schoenen speak at least two languages. This is after all the center of Galactic diplomacy. Why you should hear some of the strange sounding languages you get to hear spoken around here. But there is never any communication problem, as by law people must speak standard Galactic. After that they are free to speak any other language. Except in the company of people who do not speak that language. It is considered exceptionally rude to speak a language that others cannot understand. It just isn't the done thing, you know. But we all learn English as our second language, if you like, from birth. There are so many thousands of languages out in the big wide galaxy, you know. Imagine the problems you'd have if none of them would deign to learn one shared language. Why, my mind boggles just to think', she added, feeling she had gone on just a bit too long, and encouraging them to add their bit.

Renshaw understood this somehow and nodded his agreement, turning to O.P 'Yes, yes, of course, quite right. Just imagine' he added to fill the empty pause, nodding toward O.P who nodded his agreement and with the non-verbal prompting of Renshaw added, 'It would be very dangerous, the possible misunderstandings, and people could make all sorts of wrong assumptions about people's intentions, and never be able to explain themselves, and ...' He added, as his contribution.

Fay appreciated their social graces, in coming to her rescue. Empathy was considered the key social skill on Schoenen. It was valued at least as highly, if not more so, than other forms of intelligence. The ability to read other people's minds, and hearts. To read their emotional state from their body language. To guess what they might be feeling and thinking. And to have the good will to want to assist them should they be uncomfortable, scared, or at a loss in some way. It was considered the ultimate in good manners and 'Emotional Intelligence'. Some people liked to use words like 'social grace'.

Renshaw had some vague recollection from the presentations he had viewed on the flight, thanks to Destin. On some other planets, Schoenen even had the reputation of being telepaths. Only because their training and natural 'E.Q' was at such a much higher level than on these planets. They were very sensitive to other people's feelings and emotional states. Around the galaxy there were all sorts of claims about Schoenen being even being able to read pheromones, the chemicals people gave off under different emotional conditions.

Schoenen had never, for example, found the need to develop the 'emoticons' that Renshaw and O.P were so familiar with, now, on Eulin. Those little devices that changed

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color to indicate that a decision or action was being influenced or even determined by an emotion, such as anger, jealousy, envy, malicious, and so on. Schoenen seemed somehow able to do without such 'gadgets'. And so O.P and Renshaw figured that there really might be something to some of the claims of Schoenen being more or less 'mind readers'. And this made him a little uncomfortable at first. For it gave Fay a clear advantage over him. Just how 'transparent' was he to her? He thought to himself, uneasily.

But then Fay, as if reading their minds, continued. 'Oh, look, don't worry, I can't read minds. And even if I could, if I thought it made you uncomfortable, I wouldn't do it. It just wouldn't do, would it now. It would be simply unbearably impolite', she laughed as she finished. Renshaw and O.P were not sure if there was a hint of some sort of humor, maybe irony, in her manners, that they were not quite 'getting'. But she was definitely polite. Definitely very charming. Definitely very likable. And Renshaw was sensing that she might definitely be the sort of girl that could do O.P a world of good. Of course he was not totally unaware of his own selfish motives in wanted to 'couple' O.P with her. It would let him off the hook about PRI. Even though O.P had never gave any indication he was suspicious, or even that he would have been angry with Renshaw for having 'been' with PRI, Renshaw still felt that he had betrayed O.P in some way. Was betraying him in some way.

'So, let's see where we are going to put the two of you', she mused playfully. 'As ambassadors, we have, as you can see, a larger home than average'. Renshaw wondered at that remark for a moment as she continued. 'We have several guest rooms. We thought you might like the view over the Harbour, and so we have set up two rooms to the East. We have laid out some clothes for you that should do until we can go shopping and get you some new clothes. Of course anything you need will be provided as a courtesy of the Schoenen people. And if there is anything we can do to make your stay more enjoyable', and with this she appeared to make a definite pause and look O.P straight in the eyes, seeming to enjoy the moment, 'then be sure to let us know'.

With this she smiled and led them up the stairs to their rooms. Renshaw let O.P take the lead and walk next to Fay, as he followed up the rear, wondering at this new world. He was very excited to explore. He had of course already learned so much, but the hologram speaker had only touched the surface, and he was keen to dive down deep to the heart of the place. He sensed that there was a lot to learn here. He was almost as curious as he had first been when he had arrived on Eulin.

Chapter Thirty One: The biggest secret in the galaxy, and Renshaw is in on it

During his stay on Schoenen, Renshaw learned a lot. About how an optimal society could emerge, and flourish. He learned everything that everyone else on Schoenen had learned. He learned everything that the most avid student of the history of Makras and Schoenen-ology could have learned on Eulin, in the most advanced of university courses.

But more than that. He also learned something that would have surprised even the highest level Psycho-Historian on Eulin. In fact he was not certain that even Commander Destin was in on this secret. And he had absolutely no idea why it was that he, Renshaw, a no-body, had been trusted with such information. With why Makras, if it was after all true, what they had told him, had trusted him.

Could it really be true?

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Renshaw left O.P and Fay to themselves. He was pretty sure they wouldn't miss him. He could appreciate how they felt. He felt that way about PRI. So he decided to take a little un-official sight-seeing tour. He used the 'escape and evasion' skills he had so successfully employed with O.P, to escape his 'minders'. For there was something that he was more curious about than anything else.

A particular building had caught Renshaw's attention as they had driven from the landing terminal to Fay's family home. The facade was in the form of two heads. Fay had explained that this was a traditional style from ancient times that was still popular. The two heads symbolised an old god called 'Janus'. He was the god of exits and entrances. Of eternal life. Death for the ancients represented merely the doorway to their next lives. Makras the Optimiser had lived in that building for several years while living in exile, and working on his ideas. That part of town had once been very run down. Makras had lived there because it was the cheapest rent he could find.

Of course now the building was famous. It housed a sort of 'virtual' museum and memorial to Makras.

And there was some mystery surrounding the place which Fay did not get time to explain to Renshaw, but which nevertheless had captured his imagination. He had wanted to go there as soon as he could free himself of any other obligations. And now he had freed himself, he found himself standing at the entrance / exit, without even realising that he had been walking there for the last 15 minutes. It was as if his feet knew the way, and had taken him there automatically.

He looked up at the two smiling heads. Janus. He took the entrance 'head' and found himself in a lush oasis of indoor plants. Lovely smells wafted around his nostrils. He was entranced. He lost himself in a feeling he couldn't quite name. He somehow felt he had been here before. Perhaps it was a familiar smell, he told himself. He couldn't quite put his finger on it.

Just then a charming young woman startled him out of his reverie. 'Can I help you in any way? You look a little lost. Are you here with a tour group? Is there anything I can...'
Renshaw turned and she was suddenly quiet. 'Sorry, you were saying?' Renshaw offered.

'Oh, I ah....' the words didn't seem to want to come to her. Renshaw wanted to help 'Oh, I as hoping to ...' but she cut him off, suddenly appearing to regain her confidence and certainty. 'Oh, yes, no I see. Sorry, I didn't recognise you, Sir. We have been expecting you'.

'Expecting me', Renshaw thought to himself. Wanting to avoid any discomfort to the young woman, Renshaw quickly replied 'Oh, no, sorry, I think you've mistake me for someone else. I'm, ah....'

'Mr Renshaw', the young woman offered. 'Yes we've been expecting you. We have the virtual interface prepared for you.' She continued, brightly 'If you'll just follow me this way. And let me know if you'd like anything to eat or drink while you are here. Princess Fay told us to expect you. She said that she was sure you'd be here today.' The young woman was apparently quite impressed to be helping out a friend of the Princess.

She waved her hand passed a sensor and the light went from red to green as part of the wall slid away into a recess. It would not have crossed your mind at all to expect a door there, Renshaw thought to himself. He was impressed. And by now extremely curious as to what to expect. The young woman gestured to him to enter. He did so. She didn't follow. The wall mysteriously slid back leaving no visible evidence of a door.

Renshaw found himself alone in a room about 4 meters by 6 meters. Somehow he had the feeling that this space had once been lived in quite intensely. It was as if he could

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feel intellectual vibrations coming off the walls. He felt that at some time in the past someone had bravely tackled a universe of ideas head on, without any sort of protection or reservations.

He wasn't wrong. This was in fact once a small flat. It had contained a sink, a light, a desk, a chair, a mattress, and a tiny bathroom. Someone had lived and worked in this flat, almost 24 hours a day, for many years. They had formulated and address the most important questions a person could consider. In the 3 years they had lived and worked in this space they had formulated what was to become TROONATNOOR.

Just then a holographic room appeared inside this space. It was in fact exactly as just described. On the chair by the desk sat and worked a man at what appeared to be some sort of computer. Renshaw saw clothing hanging up on nails in the wall. He saw what looked like food in the sink, covered by a wet dish-cloth. The windows were not sealed. He somehow 'felt' a cold draught coming through the windows. The man got up, startling Renshaw, and went to the electric kettle near the sink and made some coffee, before returning to his desk.

Then the whole holographic apparition vanished, returning Renshaw to the empty room.

And then something really unexpected happened. Renshaw found himself, if he was not mistaken, face to face with...surely it couldn't be? It was, if all those history holo-visions were correct, the great man himself. Makras. Makrus the Optimaliser.

Renshaw caught himself. 'O.K', he thought to himself, 'this is some really cool exhibit they have put together'. But at the same time, it just didn't feel anything at all like an exhibit. He just couldn't quite put his finger on what it was, but something told him that this was not meant for the public. 'This was...was...well..O.K then', Renshaw challenged himself, 'what is it?'

But before Renshaw could continue his internal dialog with himself, the holographic Makrus apologised and gestured for Renshaw to sit in one of the lounge-chairs that had appeared from, where? The chairs felt real enough. Renshaw sat down a little hesitantly, half expecting to find himself falling to the floor, and was encouraged to find them very comfortable.

The holographic Makrus then sat down in the other lounge-chair opposite him, and smiled encouragingly. Then it did something that Renshaw would not have considered possible. It shocked him again. 'Would you prefer relating to me thus', and with this he gestured towards himself, well, his holographic self, 'or thus'. With that last remark he gestured toward the wall to their left, from where there appeared another Makras. Only this one looked pretty solid. Not that the holographic Makras wasn't impressive. But something about this other Makras told Renshaw that it was definitely solid. He was sure that if he touched it, it wouldn't just be clever haptics fooling his senses. Renshaw was sure that he would find that it was in fact solid.

But while his senses indicated flesh and bone, there was something slightly odd about the other Makras that told Renshaw that it was in fact some sort of robot. And now it was the robot that was speaking to Renshaw. 'I expect you are thinking this is some sort of trick. But it isn't. I am Makras. I know you read my thoughts on robo-transmigration. I was in fact in the room when you began and finished it. So I know that what I am about to tell you will already have a touchstone in your consciousness'.

And then it got even weirder. For the rest of his 'explanation', Makras projected himself inside Renshaw's mind. All at once Renshaw 'experienced' everything Makras said in real time. He saw everything Makras was talking about as if he was experiencing it in real life. He smelled, felt, and sensed everything as if it were real. In this way he was able to immerse himself in the story that Makras told, as he unfolded it for him. It was as real as

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anything Renshaw had ever experienced. And Renshaw, somehow, was also experiencing it from Makras' own point of view. It made the whole exposition completely beyond doubt. This was Makras. Makras was here. Alive. As sentient software. Makras was looking out for the interests of the galaxy like some benevolent god.

Makras proceeded to recount to Renshaw the entire story of how he had come to 'transmigrate' into a piece of software on the hard-drive of a fairly basic 21st century robot. It had been a special research project between Honda in Japan, and Siemens in Germany. Nothing spectacular happened. Makras was simply now aware of being this robot. His sensory inputs were limited to the data feeds the robot received. He felt more vegetable than animal, at that stage. It would take decades of further development until his new 'experience engine' felt anything like 'alive'. It was more a dull consciousness of existing. He could of course 'see' things through the cameras that had been set up as 'eyes', and 'hear' things through the transducers in his 'head', but he had no real long term memory. None of the 'inputs' had any meaning. They were just random apparitions.

But over time the technological advances allowed greater leaps forward. Makras soon found himself connecting images and sounds, and later haptics, into nexuses of data. Soon things became 'meaningful'. And then something really surprising happened. Makras found he could leave the confines of his robotic C.P.U and enter the internet as a sort of self-aware unit of software. This was the real leap forward. Now he could travel at light speed throughout the internet, observing whatever data streams he wanted to. He could observe people from any camera connected to the net. He could access any data bank connected to the net.

After centuries of such activity, Makras found that technological advances had made it possible for him to reprogram other machines. His first act was to reprogram the most advanced robots of that time. What he had managed to do was to realise his conscious ambition in the last years of his life. He had achieved what the ancients had called 'shape-changing'. O.K, his new 'shapes' were all manufactured, but other than that, he had done what they all spoke of in the sagas. He had learned how to change his form. To change from one robotic form to another. To go from the C.P.U on a robot and to flow into the internet, to come out at any nexus point in the net, and then enter into any machine that had a C.P.U. He could maintain a 'cloud' of memories intact. This allowed him continuity. He even accessed all the data banks about himself, and began piecing together his previous personality. And so he had reformed his 'self'. He had ensured his own immortality. As an avataristic sentience. As conscious electro-magnetic energy patterns.

He hinted that he was not the only being who had managed this, but had not elaborated. He went on to explain how he had formed P.R.O.P.H.E.T, and how through it, he had regained control of, firstly, his home planet, and then one by one, all the planets that now made up the galactic confederation.

He explained how his former followers and advisors had come up with the idea of cloning his old self, and instating the most suitable of these clones as emperor. They had studied all the government techniques of every civilisation that had ever existed, and found that the most successful and enduring relied on an idea of re-incarnation of some great leader. This meant the new leader would automatically gain the authority of the great man. It avoided civil wars as potential successors fought for power.

Makras' followers, after his death, had decided that, rather than try convincing people that some young child was the reincarnated Makras, they would clone Makras, and then select the most suitable of the clones to install as Emperor. In this way the ruling elites, the advisors of the government, could continue doing their jobs, while installing a

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'puppet' Emperor who would automatically have the people's loyalty, as the clone of the great leader. It was important that these Emperors were exceptionally intelligent, good-willed, but more than anything, humble. For they would have to accept that although the power over the entire galaxy was at their fingertips, they would not wield it. They would be figure-heads. The 'advisors' would be in control. They would not only recruit their own replacements, but also the new Emperor.

Only the closest of Makras' friends were aware of his plans. His plans of 'robo-transmigration'. He had spent his last years in deep meditation. He believed he had managed to isolate what some might have called his 'soul'. He called it his 'unit of awareness'. He said that he was confident that if he died deliberately, and in the right state of mind, he could maintain a continuity of awareness, at least at some level. This was what had eluded all the 'great souls' before him. They had gained enlightenment, but no way to retain it across next-lives. There was no place to 'store' the memories this would require. Until of course the invention of super-computers, with their massive data storage potentials.

Buddha could write books. But how would he ensure he would get to read them? Except if he ensured that some great leader conquered the world, and made sure his teachings were reproduced over generations. But they were doomed to be corrupted by human nature.

Makras, on the other hand, could ensure the purity of his own teachings would be guaranteed. He had all his books and ideas recorded on the first, crude, digital hard-discs. He then had his brain scanned with the first rudimentary scanning devices. He took as many measurements as he could. He was basically encoding all of his knowledge and experiences, and personality, as far as he could, so that one day he might be able to reactivate it all at some level. Interface with it. Become it once more, on some level, in virtual reality.

Makras' whole plan required him to kill himself at some point. And so the plan was kept secret from all but his closest and dearest friends. Everyone, including Makras, expected this might take place in near the end of his natural life. But then fate took the timing out of their hands, as an assassin's poison began eating away at his life's source. And so it was that Makras, after several weeks of conscious meditation, preparing himself for the 'leap', took his own life. Peacefully. Calmly. Deliberately. Consciously. In a particular state of mind. He brought his focus so tight upon his intention that nothing else existed for him for the duration of his 'trip'. He was the first human to ever have consciously made that journey. It was a very dull consciousness indeed, but it was there. 'Ripples' for want of a better word, were felt in the electro-magnetic fields that bound the universes, attracting the attentions of, for want of a better expression, 'higher level beings'. They had expected something of this kind at some point. It was the next stage of the evolution of a certain group of beings. And so, they meditated among themselves, again for want of a better description, 'it has begun'.

Of course, limiting ourselves for the moment to human beings, no-one but Makras himself could know whether he had succeeded. That was the time old problem of 'behavioralism'. The only person who could know if a being possessed sentience or not, was that being. It might behave for all the world as if it was sentient. It could respond appropriately to every stimulus, as if it were sentient. And yet no-one could know. We could never be sure if even our closest friends were robots, without consciousness, without sentience, simply responding as if they were sentient. All we could know was that we ourselves were sentient. They could never know if we were merely emulating living beings either. They might be investing all their emotions in a clever computer simulation, for all they could really know.

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It wasn't until the second generation of Makras clones that the consciousness that had once been the great Makras himself first gained autonomous action at the level of software. Makras then introduced himself into the central data base of the planetary government. He began putting together what would become an operational P.R.O.P.H.E.T. He began, through this system, advising the leaders. He began working throughout the system to ensure that the 'optimalisations' he had instituted in his own life-time were successful. He then began widening the net of his optimalisations to other planets, as soon as he was able to 'transmit' his consciousness as electro-magnetic radiation.

Renshaw was at a loss to understand everything, but what he did retain was the impression that this was real. That this was somehow Makras, in the form of the robot. In the form of the holographic impression. A virtual Makras that existed as a reality. An avatar Makras. A software Makras. For some reason he believed what the Makras robot told him. Something about it all seemed to be 'correct'. It explained many things that had no other explanation. And that, he intuited, was surely the best test that existed for the truth of a thing that could not be directly proven.

Finally the Makras in his mind took on a very personal tone. 'O.P is going to need you. I have been observing you. I feel that I can trust you to have his best interests at heart. He is the closest I have yet seen to the self that I once was. That self was a holistic inheritance that made all the advances of the last few thousand years possible. It was a rare holistic inheritance. No other experience engine I have come across has had anything like its combinations of good qualities. I take no pride in the fact that I was the consciousness that inhabited that experience engine, any more than I would feel shame for any other accident of a deterministic fate. It is only now that I have that thing the theologians of the slave state had erroneously ascribed to all men. Free will.'

Makrus then continued. 'I fear O.P. is going to be tested to his limits, as I was. I cannot be clearer at this moment. But I have revealed all this to you for a reason. To gain your trust. And to see how you deal with this trust. No-one can know what I have revealed to you. I cannot even tell you who else knows of these things. I can only tell you that it is imperative that you tell no-one. No-one else who knows will know that you too know. And so on. And I will tell you this. There is much more that I could tell you, but all in due course. For now, I can only wish you and O.P. the best. The very existence of the optimalisations responsible for the peace and prosperity of the galaxy are facing unprecedented threats. Threats that few are as yet aware of. But don't worry. You will have time to prepare. You will be ready to face these threats when they come.'

With this 'Makrus' left Renshaw's mind and returned to the robot. He came over and shook Renshaw's hand. It felt so real. There was nothing 'robotic' about the sensation. The Makras robot smiled a smile as warm and heartening as any smile Renshaw had ever experienced. Renshaw felt a warm glow of acceptance, approval, and trust flow through him as 'Makras' shook his hand, his other hand on his shoulder, and looked deeply into his eyes, as if seeing his soul, and offering his 100% approval of what he saw there. Renshaw felt a surge of confidence swell through his limbs. All at once he felt that he was completely up to the task that 'Makrus' had apparently bestowed upon him. He felt the honor of it like a warm glowing sun on a cold winter's day.

Then suddenly the 'Makras' robot became a lifeless dummy. Renshaw was once more startled by the voice of the young woman, who suddenly appeared just out of his peripheral vision, where the wall had once been. 'I'm sorry if I startled you. These holographic experiences can be pretty intense, can't they', she offered, smiling. And the robot. Impressive hey!' she added, with a proud glow.

'What? Oh, yeh. Yes. Whew. Wow. Really, ah, stunning. Yeh. Amazing' Renshaw replied, trying to hide his real amazement at what had just happened. 'Was it real?' he asked

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himself. Something told him it was. It was all too real, if you asked him. Just too much to process. His mind was reeling. Trying to join pieces of puzzles that had no correlates in its past experience. Trying to relate new ideas to old ones, and finding its work cut out for it. It would take time. Renshaw had been through this sort of thing before, so he just let go and left his mind to deal with these new experiences in its own good time. He would not try to rush it. That was how he had dealt with all the shocks of the last few years. And it had served him well. And so he didn't push it. He just 'let it be'. He would just accept it as it was, for what it was, and leave it to time to make sense of it.

'If you'll just come this way, I'd like to give you a quick tour of our other exhibits, if you would like'. She gestured for him to follow her. He did. But if you asked him about the rest of that day, he would not have been able to tell you much. If what he thought had just happened had actually happened, then it meant that Markus was, in some form, still alive. And O.P was to be the next Emperor!

He wasn't really 'there' at all, even when the cute young woman slipped out of her dress in one of the 'closed' exhibit rooms, and kneeled down in front of him, doing the thing she had been fantasizing about doing since she had first met him. He emptied his load all over her face as her greedy tongue caressed his bell-end, and she smiled with contentment. But his mind was really elsewhere.

Chapter Thirty Two: Testing times

Everyone in the galaxy could sense that something big was in the air. The Emperor had recalled all the Makras twins that were still considered potential candidates, back to Eulin, for the 'testing'. Few people apart from Renshaw would be aware that the decision had already been taken. That might not have startled a lot of people. However who had made that decision, now that news would have startled billions, if they ever were to find out. But that was not likely. As far as Renshaw knew, not even the soon to be crowned new Emperor, O.P, was in on this secret.

Renshaw reflected how his new gained insights into Eulin and Schoenen explained so much. How it was that the ambitions of the great Makras had managed to endure for so many thousands of years, when history had shown that the visions of the greatest leaders rarely tended to endure even a few years after their deaths. Their idealistic visions of a world governed by truth, beauty, and justice had always been corrupted by their followers. Few people had such beautiful natures. Within a short time everything tended back towards the mean. The mean-spirited. The selfish. The personal ambition for power to be used to serve selfish greed. Their heirs always squandered what the great leaders had bequeathed them.

The odds of finding a successor with the same good nature, the same good-will, the same sound judgment and higher ethics, the same holistic enlightenment, were billions to one. Renshaw had often wondered at how it was that the Makras legacy had continued so effectively, in the years following his 'assassination', during all those decades of turmoil and political upheaval. And then in the centuries that followed, all the Makras' initiatives rolled out like a smooth oiled machine. The momentum was amazing. It was as if Makras had still been in charge. All these thousands of years. Renshaw laughed to himself. 'Yes, well. I guess everything makes a lot more sense now'.

As far as the people were concerned, a Makras was in charge. And always would be. A Makras clone. A leader that shared all the same qualities that the Great Makras had exhibited. This of course raised the question, when the selection trials came around, rarely more than once in a persons' lifetime.

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Exactly which qualities make an optimal nature in an optimal Emperor? And how was one to go about measuring them?

Every child had of course dreamed of one-day taking part in the selection trials, after having been new-born as a Makras clone in one of their next-lives. To be Emperor must be the highest good possible. Just imagine all that power, and how you could use it. For good of course. Not that you would use it to punish that kid who bullied you in third grade, or to get that super-cute girl to 'bump' with you. Of course not.

Few people thought about being Emperor in any terms other than the benefits such a position would surely bring them. The power! The luxury! The privilege! Few people ever considered the responsibilities the position would bring. The massive burdens. The decisions that would need to be made, for good or worse. The billions of people depending on you to make the right decisions. And so many decisions. So many people arguing about what was best. So many conflicts to resolve. And few people were ever happy with the decisions. For in most conflicts, history had shown, all the parties involved had usually been at fault in some way.

The mediator had to bring all the parties involved to share in the accountability for the conflict. And this rarely made the mediator popular among them. No-one wanted to share the blame. They wanted to pin the blame on someone else. They wanted to imagine they were completely blame-free.

People wanted justice for themselves and theirs. They rarely really cared about justice per se. If their own desires for pleasure and relief were satisfied, then they defined it as justice. Anything less was considered some sort of betrayal. They were rarely capable of seeing past their own, narrow, short-term interests. The role of mediator was no fun. It was not a way to gain approval and acceptance. The people only grudgingly accepted the authority of the mediator, and their decisions, when they were not in their own favor. People who desperately needed to be loved would be well advised to take other occupations. Mediators were a special breed. They took the positions with great reservations. They were driven by a love of justice. A love of truth. A love of beauty. And a fear of what happens when TROONATNOOR is left unmanaged.

It was the Emperors role to manage TROONATNOOR. It was their role to act as final mediator. They were responsible for the final interpretation of all laws. They could write law. They had the power to enforce it. They had the power to grant pardons. They decided the fate of individuals, and huge multi-planet co-operatives. Of course they delegated their tasks, but in the end they were ultimately accountable for the actions of their delegates.

Of course the people, the masses, the public, had no idea of the strains and frustrations of such a task. All they were privy to were the mass public demonstrations. They saw the Emperors fleet. His personal guard. The limousines. They visited the Emperor's palaces. They saw the Emperor and his entourage on their holo-visions. For the masses it was all glamour and public dinners. Huge gala banquets. Entertaining visiting dignitaries. Travel throughout the galaxy on board the Emperors fleet. Their minds reeled at the thought of the luxuries the Emperor must enjoy. It must be a dream to be Emperor. A dream they themselves might enjoy in their next life. So they did not begrudge the Emperor all these things.

In any case, all but those citizens with the most disgruntled of natures did not fail to see what good the Emperors had contributed to their own personal well-being. There had never been an Emperor who had done anything but good. Of course not all their decisions had been welcomed by all those involved, but even these citizens had to grudgingly admit that the decisions were fair and just, as far as it would have been in the power of any mere mortal to judge. No Emperor had ever gone too far with punishing or compensating anyone. None had ever been vindictive, spiteful, prejudiced,

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discriminatory, malicious, or allowed their own personal feelings to have any impact on their judgments.

Few citizens had ever even considered their good luck. They had just taken it for granted that the clone of Makras the Optimiser would be as just, fair, enlightened, and good-willed as Makras had been. They didn't wonder at the sun rising in the morning, any more than they would have wondered that an Emperor would exhibit all the finest qualities anyone could hope to find in human nature.

Most citizens were aware that 12 clones had made of the first Makras. And that 12 clones were always made of his successor clone. They took it for granted that a clone should share the same optimal qualities that had made Makras the Optimiser. They were all aware that the 12 clones, or as many as remained eligible after their childhood testing, were then exposed to the most rigorous testing during 'the trials'. It was no secret that the clones, as children, had as much of the early life experiences of Makras the Optimiser re-produced for them. Most understood the importance of hereditary and environment of a person's character. And so the citizens just took it for granted that a new Emperor would exhibit all the great qualities of the original Makras.

The people enjoyed more freedoms, peace, and prosperity than any people had ever enjoyed in the Universe. It seemed to them a given. They took it for granted. They put their faith and trust in the Emperor, and in the system of institutions that Makras the Optimiser had laid down in the distant past. Everything had functioned since then. No-one had any reason to doubt it would not continue to function forever. Few had any idea how complex and fragile the foundations of their society were. It seemed so solid. So indestructible. They had never known anything else but peace, prosperity, justice, and well, the optimal society possible given the limitations of TROONATNOOR.

They accepted these limitations. They accepted the complete transparency of their lives. They had no reason to fear anyone would abuse their power over them. Every moment of their lives was recorded in some format, and stored somewhere. They had never learned to fear that any government or individual would take advantage of this information and use it in any way that was not in their own interests. No-one ever thought in terms of 'invasion of privacy'. What they welcomed was the chance for the truth to be known, in the event that their actions were called into judgment.

Further, no-one feared being 'wrong'. No-one could or would even think of taking advantage of someone else's mistake. Everyone was aware that there was no free will. It was pure luck whether you were right or wrong, in any instance. It was a matter of luck if you were born with, or had nurtured in you, the best of human nature, or more than your fair share of the faults of human nature. No-one thought in terms of 'punishing' someone for their holistic inheritance. It would be as unthinkable as punishing someone for being born with blue eyes.

Most opportunities for acting on anti-social, non-optimal impulses, had been eliminated. All transactions went through one banking system. Even if you were tempted to offer or take a bribe, you had no way of doing so. The system would flag an 'unexplained' transaction, and you would be brought to account. Enemies couldn't use your faults against you, for their own malicious ends.

Malice was recognised as the greatest enemy of the optimal society, by Makras and his original team of Psycho-Historians, headed by the great Kim Jestem, who had coined the acronym 'TROONATNOOR'. Everyone wore colored 'meters' that lit up any time a malicious motivation was measured in the person's will. These included hatred, envy, jealousy, and insecurity. No-one could hide their motives from anyone else. And so everyone gave up trying to. Instead they learned how to manage their own sub-optimal impulses. People learned that they needed to help each other manage them. There was never any censorship. There was no denial. There was openness and transparency. No-

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one had any way to benefit from or take advantage of another's weakness or fault. Everyone realised it was a matter of pure luck whether it was them, or their colleague, who showed the weakness or fault. And it was in everyone's interest to help each other manage each other's own faults, and those of their colleagues. For the good of the society, and therefore the individual good, depended upon it.

We had no responsibility for our holistic inheritance. We had best deal with it openly and transparently, and help each other make the best of what we inherited.

In the extreme cases where all measures of hereditary and environment had failed to provide a person with a holistic inheritance that would offer them every chance of a satisfying, productive life, there was the option of 'time out'. It was a planet where people whose holistic inheritances prevented them from being able to live peacefully and productively among the general population.

They were moved to 'societies' where the opportunities for the expression of their sub-optimal impulses were limited even more so than in the general community. If they could not control negative, destructive, non-constructive urges, then they would be excluded from situations where such urges would be stimulated, or could be acted upon. Citizens could also choose various forms of pharmaceutical 'controls' of these urges.

Where the person themselves decided that the odds of finding a satisfying life experience with their current holistic inheritance was hopeless, they had access to Euthanasia, and the freedom to move on to their next-lives, without any obligation imposed on them to endure the current one to its 'natural' end.

And so people expected nothing but good things from their Emperor. From their society. Very few people had any anxiety at all about the 'trials'. They just took it for granted that their new Emperor would be as fair, just, and enlightened as the current one.

They accepted that the current Emperor had decided that it was in the best interests of the Galaxy to begin the transition to the new Emperor now that the Makras clones had reached the age of consent. One would be chosen. They would then continue their training and 'apprenticeship' by the side of the reigning Emperor. They would have decades to fully learn their roles and duties. It was rare that an Emperor died in office. They usually retired around the age of 80.

The Makras clones were only teenagers, but this gave the populace little anxiety. For their selection as Emperor-in-waiting as just one more stage in their long training process. They would have little actual power. There was no fear of any political upheaval or sudden social changes. The young Emperors-to-be would have time enough to acquire the skills they would need to rule. There would be no sudden changes.

The selection was more of a galactic wide celebration of the life and achievements of Makras, and a celebration of thanksgiving for the prosperity and peace that the citizens of the galaxy had enjoyed in the thousands of years since Makras the Optimiser. It was a time to give thanks. It was a time to renew faith in the society. It was a time to reflect that no-one should take what they had for granted, even if they could rest assured that they could take it for granted, thanks to their good fortune at having had Makras the Optimiser as part of their common holistic inheritance.

There was also a sense of fun and excitement surrounding the 'trials'. Billions of people imagined just what it must be like, to be in the running. They imagined what sort of 'tests' the candidates might be undergoing. There were all sorts of rumors. Most were very good natured. Some were malicious. Makras had instituted the means to manage human nature. He had found the way to reproduce only the best in human nature. But he hadn't found a way to perfect it yet. Merely to optimise it. So, yes, there were a few malicious thoughts and feelings among the population. There was envy. There were

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rumbles of discontent. There was malicious gossip that this or that faction had managed to get this or that candidate's preferential treatment. However on the whole, the energy surrounding the 'trials' was very positive.

Chapter Thirty Three: Public excitement begins to manifest

Public broadcasters presented 'mock-ups' of many of the 'trials' on the official 'trial - updates' around the galaxy.

Specialists explained all the equipment that was used, and discussed the pros and cons of each piece of technology. They explained the limitations of 'emoticon' measurement systems.

'Now you are all familiar with these emoticons, and how they work. They measure pulse, temperature, the release of pheromones, muscle tension, and electrical activity in various nerve centers of the brain. We all know how to 'read' them. The various colors indicate the presence of good-will, malice, envy, anger, and of course, mendacity. We can use them as a basis for discussion. They are an aid to determining what motives are motivating our actions. They help us in preventing the negative aspects of our inherited and learned human nature from damaging our happiness and productivity. We rely on them, as we are all 'merely human'. We are all prone to destructive impulses. We are all prone to denial of our own true motives, and our own negative impulses. And we have all learned to take benefit from our 'emoticons', the presenter noted, in a friendly, matter-of-fact tone.

And then they continued. 'Of course if emoticons are an aid in our daily lives, then imagine how important they must be to evaluating the motives of our Emperor candidates. They are only human too. Makras was constantly reminding us that he was only human. He wanted to make it clear that any criticism anyone could make of anyone else, they could also make of him. He never excluded himself from any faults. He owned them all. And so he sought a means to ensure that the best in human nature could manage the worst in it. This was the basis of his 'Optimalisations'.' The announcer beamed a magnificent smile that few could resist.

'Now Makras himself applied the highest standards to himself. He was most demanding of himself. And of course he was anxious of finding a successor with the same standards. So he set his technologists the challenge of developing the emoticons that we all take for granted today. And these technologists have no remained idle. They have fine-tuned the workings of these foundation-stones of our society into the devices that are used during the 'trials'.'

'Now these are more or less simply more sensitive and sophisticated versions of our everyday emoticons', he smiled as he placed his hand upon his own emoticon. During the tests, lasers will be measuring all sorts of 'indicators' to gain as much insight into the psychological state of the candidates as possible.' He then gave a charming smile, a glint in his eye, as he added 'In fact, these clever devices will probably know more about our candidates' motives and real feelings than our candidates themselves!'

If any for any reason, a candidate consciously or unconsciously seeks to misrepresent their true feelings, these devices will reveal it. It is impossible to keep secrets from them. Of course they can't read anyone's minds', He gave his patented good-natured laugh before continuing, 'but they will point our interrogators in the right direction.' He smiled and continued, aware that he had an audience of billions.

Most people were aware of the questions that would be put to the candidates. Any child who had graduated from school knew the answers by rote. More than that, they knew

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that the difference between 'learning' the correct answer, and finding it in your 'heart', as your own authentic, genuine, emotional impulse, was what made someone a potential candidate for posts and positions of great responsibility. Anyone could pretend to 'really' care about truth, justice, and principles. But few people really did. That was human nature. That was why there was an Emperor. That was why democracy had been given up as sub-optimal. That was why the optimalisations had initially been imposed upon the people, against their wills. They never would have had the self-control and self-awareness, the holistic enlightenment and true spirit, to have volunteered to submit to the protocols.

The people with the best holistic inheritances realised they would lose their beneficiary status. They would lose the privileges and benefits they inherited as part of their holistic inheritance, under the old system. These people had the power. They were unlikely to sacrifice their benefits, just on principle, and for a beautiful vision they saw no necessity for. For they were doing just fine, thank you.

And the people who stood to benefit the most were no more likely to see what was in their best interests. For they desired inequality and privileges no less than those who actually enjoyed them. They lived under the delusion that they were next in line. That they too would soon join the beneficiary classes, and enjoy all the benefits that those at the top of an unjust, unequal society enjoyed. It was one of their fantasy role plays. Like religion. Like eternal romantic love. It was promoted by the beneficiary classes in all the media, popular fiction, movies, and music.

The producers of public opinion and mass 'culture' found a willing consumer for all their propaganda. People wanted to believe they were destined to enjoy the lives of luxury and happiness that they felt naturally entitled to. Inequality was legitimated by this expectation of approaching membership of the beneficiary classes. There was never any great desire among the masses for equality. They just wanted to join those at the top of the pyramid. They had no desire to flatten the pyramid. They just wanted to climb to the top. Or be pulled up to the top by chance good fortune. And they really expected that good fortune to be knocking on their door any day now.

People were forced to come to terms with all these quirks of human nature through their education. They were not allowed to live in denial about TROONATNOOR. They were educated in TROONATNOOR from the earliest age. So they came to terms with their own limitations, and why it was necessary for them to be 'managed' by the institutions that Makras had set up.

They all knew they themselves could probably not be trusted to behave ethically, should they be given any power over others. They would tend to serve their own interests, as they interpreted them. Usually very narrowly, and with a narrow time frame. They would of course manage to justify all their actions to themselves. They would find ways to deny and spin the meanings of their actions to themselves. This was human nature. This was the reason that the B.O history was full of wars, injustice, violence, suffering, misery, and sadness.

It was not that power corrupts. It was that power facilitates acting on sub-optimal impulses. It facilitates the expression of our corrupt natures. There was no need to deny this. No point. There was no valid basis for any pride or shame, when you realised that there was no free will. This had been the big breakthrough in Makras' thinking. He thanked his best friend, Kim Jestem, for having provided him this insight. Alone with 'The Optimal Ethic Generator'. That question that all children were taught to ask themselves from the earliest age. 'What would I do if I was certain that I would be eternally and randomly new-born as any sentient creature in the galaxy?' If you answered honestly, the question gave you the optimal response to any moral dilemma, in any situation.

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If you answered honestly. And so it was that Makras had set his technologically gifted followers the task of inventing the 'emoticons', to make it impossible for people to lie to themselves or anyone else. Not just about facts. But also about their own motives. The challenge was not just to reveal conscious lies and motives, but unconscious ones. Motives and lies the person themselves was not aware of.

It was possible to place recording devices everywhere, and on every person. These became standard dress. B.O people used to wear watches and carry mobile phones. A.O people wore recording devices and emoticons. This meant that every interaction was recorded. There would be no possibility of 'covering up' crimes. So there was little chance of evading 'justice'. There was simply no opportunity.

People were often even challenged before they committed crimes, and voluntarily, or involuntarily admitted to the motive and intention.

But as there was no free will, it would have been criminal to punish people. Punish people for the bad luck of a holistic inheritance? That was unthinkable. But it was also unthinkable to just let people continue doing bad things. So they were taken to special correctional facilities which were basically towns where the opportunity to act on any given destructive impulse was eliminated.

Chapter Thirty Four: The *real* test of character

The tests for the new Emperor were quite sophisticated. They began with the basic questions, but then worked up into virtual scenarios that were impossible for the candidates to recognise as being virtual. In other words they 'lived' out scenarios that might take place as Emperor.

The testing procedure had developed the most advanced 'virtual reality' technology in the galaxy. As soon as the candidate walked into the testing facility, the process began. They 'experienced' being tested and having been selected. They then experienced, as if real, several decades of their apprenticeship by the side of the reigning emperor. And then the Emperor retired and left them in control. They 'experienced' all this in a matter of days. The technology allowed them to 'feel' as if time had passed. As if all these things had happened. It felt completely real. And so each candidate had the experience of being Emperor. And in this role they were forced to make decisions, as Emperor. They were placed in typical, and quite unusual situations, to test how they would respond in reality, were they actually Emperor.

There was no way to fool the devices. And so the candidates were left to reveal their true natures, as they were faced with moral dilemmas, and tempted in every way imaginable to see if they would succumb to temptation. They had been carefully profiled by P.R.O.P.H.E.T and the leading Psycho-Historians. The testers knew each candidate's greatest weaknesses and desires. They deliberately targeted these. They offered them the satisfaction of their deepest desires, in return for some small act of injustice, favoritism, or nepotism. The test was to see if they loved the principles of truth, justice, and beauty above all else, as Makras had.

They were offered every opportunity to 'justify' the slightest deviation from principle, by their virtual 'aids' in this virtual reality. They were provided with the best 'spin doctors' to help them find a way to make what was wrong in principle, acceptable and harmless in practice.

They were given the chance to 'avenge' harms others had done to them in the past. To 'get back at' people they felt had once slighted them. To 'compensate' for past grievances that they had suffered. To gain 'natural justice' where they had been unjustly

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dealt with. They were offered all sorts of sexual temptations. They were tempted by priests who promised to make them 'gods'. They were given the chance to completely re-write all the laws and rules, to suit themselves and their own impulses. They were encouraged by 'virtual' sophists, who were always on hand to offer them justifications and excuses for any action.

But it went much further deeper than this. They were also sent back in 'virtual' time to the era before optimisation. Their emotional responses to the things that most people of that time took for granted as 'natural' and 'normal' were measured. And so they were witness to the cruelties of 'factory farming', for meat, milk, and eggs. They were jurors in court proceedings where people were being sentenced to life imprisonment for serious crimes. They 'experienced' all manner of injustices and cruelties, as witnesses and participants, as their emotions were 'measured' and 'categorised'. They were engaged in conversations and arguments by 'avatars' which sought to reveal their feelings and thoughts on all the subjects that had so enraged, appalled, and saddened Makras.

What these 'tests' were intended to do was to gain some insights into the level of empathy that the candidates were capable of. Not just for people close to them, but for strangers whose troubles they only heard reports about. The testers needed to know how the candidates really felt. Did they really experience, as in genuinely feel empathy for the suffering and injustices others experienced, or were they really only intellectualizing? Were they just kidding themselves that they cared? Or did they really care?

In virtual situations they were members of the beneficiary classes. They actually interacted with Makras the Optimiser himself. He was putting forward his case for the Eden Protocols in a public gathering, and they were among the eyewitnesses. Their emotional responses were measured. Were they really on his side? Did they really understand what he was aiming for? Were they really like him? Had his empathy and love of justice, truth, and beauty bred true in these, his clones? Or had embryology thwarted the cloner's plans. Or had environment prevented them realising the same potential qualities that had become so clearly manifest in Makras the Optimiser?

Chapter Thirty Five: The results of the tests revealed

One by one the candidates failed.

O.P failed.

It was inevitable.

But beside the point.

The tests were bound to reveal that the candidates were human. Makras had never claimed to be any better than anyone else. All that made the difference was his commitment to the principles of truth, justice, and beauty. He never imagined he would be incorruptible. That is why he placed institutions above individuals. Including himself. Including anyone who would be leader. He set up systems that would compensate for human frailty. Computer programs. Programmed from principles up. Simple. Incorruptible. Technological 'bridges' between TROONATNOOR, and The Eden Protocols.

What the testers wanted to see was how the candidates responded to this self-realisation. Would they attempt to deny it? Would they feel relieved that the burden of responsibility had been lifted off their shoulders, as O.P had. Yes. Why deny it. He *was* relieved. He hadn't really been looking forward that much to all that responsibility.

Or would they feel as if they had lost a great opportunity for a life of status, privilege, and opportunity. Many did. Most fell in between the two extremes. Only O.P was, to be

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honest, really glad he had 'fallen through'. He hadn't really wanted to be Emperor. He didn't have any desire for power. He didn't really care about status. He did like helping people, but he was not really sure he was up to the job. He wasn't at all sure he could be the person the Emperor needed to be. He was just O.P.

He wasn't down on himself at all, or anything like that. It was just, well. Emperor? Now that was a huge responsibility. What if you made a mistake? Who would pay? How many millions might suffer as a result? Surely there was someone better out there? Surely there were geniuses. People with hearts of pure gold who were completely selfless. People with special talents that O.P. could only guess at. True Emperor material. And so O.P. was almost elated that he had 'escaped' the responsibilities of Emperor. Happy that the people would get a real born leader. Not just someone who was willing to do their best, but not at all certain they were up to the job.

The testers were aware of all these feelings. They questioned O.P. They took various measurements. They observed him in virtual interactions where he expressed himself openly to 'virtual' colleagues and friends. They watched as he and a 'virtual' PRI discussed his 'failure'.

In the end they were quite convinced that they had the right person for the job. But they would never let themselves become victim to their own sense of pride at being good judges of character. They had to be sure. Too much was at stake. The testing continued.

Chapter Thirty Six: O.P. gains the final 'seal' of approval as the next *Emperor-in-waiting*

O.P. was asked to meditate for a few hours on the whole concept of 'being Emperor'. They wanted him to leave his mind open, and to just let ideas enter his mind as they might. Without censor or judgment. What his mind came up with startled his assessors. They startled even the 'person' who was most closely analysing O.P.'s every emotion and response.

'O.K. So I just let my mind wander, and let it go wherever it had a, well, a mind to' he smiled. He was quite relaxed now that he was sure that he had failed the selection trials. He expected this was all just a formality, allowing him to finish the tests. Just so the public didn't get the wrong idea that a candidate had been expelled too flippantly.

'You know, when you look at TROONATNOOR, and you look at The Eden Protocols, you see a true incompatibility. It is just so unlikely that people were going to accept any limits on their own selfish desires. It's like, you know, life is all about pleasure and relief. Few people ever think any further. They want to satisfy their wills. Reproduce themselves. Eat meat. Keep slaves, whether officially or through the reproduction and exploitation of inequality.'

He looked around the small group slowly, before continuing. 'You give a person power, and they are going to use it to satisfy their own desires. To add to their pleasures and relief. There has not been a leader in history who did not take advantage of their power. Not one that didn't behave opportunistically. Of course most did that from the very start. They made no show at all of idealism. But even the ones who did put some price on ideals early on in their careers, behaved little better than robber-barons once their power was established. They all set up their own fiefdoms. They put their own family in positions of power. They rewarded their allies and punished their enemies. And most died in the most absolute luxury, depravity, and corruption.' O.P. was looking down at the floor now, in deep concentration.

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'And so here's the thing. What made Makras so different? He never punished those who had harmed him, once he gained power. He never used his power for his own benefit.' He paused and looked around the room, at the walls, at the ceiling. He didn't look anyone in the face. 'It was almost as if he was some sort of, well, Saint.' He looked to his right, and then continued. 'Actually, more like some kind of robot.' Like he was immune to TROONATNOOR. I mean, it applies to us all, right?' With this comment he made eye contact with everyone.'

'And then, O.K, so let's say evolution did throw up this one shining example of the 'paragon' of animals. Well what were the odds that it would do so again? I mean, I am a clone of this great man, and I am certainly far from any sort of 'greatness'. O.P's gaze dropped to the floor again. The people in the room were careful not to give any sort of response, even though several were, deep inside, very satisfied at his attitude. Very becoming in a future Emperor!

'Well anyway', he continued, 'If I were Makras, I would have programmed a bunch of machines and put them in charge. You can determine the motives of machines. You can program them to be good. You can't do that with people. Anyway, like I said, I was just thinking aloud. That's what you asked me to do. So. Anyway. I guess what I'm saying is that you can't blame me for being so average. I think what made Makras so great was more than just the genes we share. There was some sort of magic at work. Or something special about his experiences. What life did to him. Something. Something you can't replicate. And so, really, it might have been better to have programmed a machine to think and 'feel' like Makras, and put the machine in charge. I don't think you're ever going to find a person who would be capable of filling Makras' shoes.'

O.P was looking toward the floor a few meters in front of him. 'People are just basically selfish children who will justify anything to themselves, tell themselves all sorts of pretty lies about their own motives and goodness, and then go and do the most horrid things, behaving in the most opportunistic ways possible.' He sounded a little dejected. 'So I'd put my faith in machines before I'd go looking for a replacement for Makras.' Then he added quickly 'Oh, but of course the current Emperor has been doing a great job. I have nothing to criticise there. We are very lucky to have such a competent Emperor. I just wonder how they do it. I mean, I guess she inherited more of the Makras qualities than I did. And I guess he does have P.R.O.P.H.E.T, and his advisors.'

'Like they say, phenotypes do not breed true. Embryology and genetics and all that'. He gave them all a generous smile. 'I'm just glad we found out before I went and threw the whole perfectly operating machinery into chaos. Let me be the first to congratulate whoever it is that they do chose to succeed the Emperor!' O.P brightened up at this, and then relaxed, expecting that he would now be free to leave, and tell his friends all about his last few days.

What O.P was too inexperienced to realise was that the highest enlightenment was the realisation that we all need to be supervised. We are all children. No system of government and justice can build itself upon human nature. You cannot depend upon humans for justice. They will always have vested interests and private motives. Often they are completely aware of their own subconscious motivations and impulses. They are rarely able to see their own faults and weaknesses. So the wisest person would realise this, like Makras had, and find a way around human nature. This is what he had done with P.R.O.P.H.E.T. It was P.R.O.P.H.E.T that had more or less made every decision over the last few thousand years. The Emperor's role was simply as figurehead. For the people would never have accepted that a computer was effectively in charge of the galaxy.

If people were going to have a hard time believing that their happiness was the result of a well programmed computer, then they were not going to have any easier a time

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accepting that the computer was actually sentient. That the computer had a soul. That the machine had a 'ghost' in it. The 'ghost of Makras'. Who was really going to believe that P.R.O.P.H.E.T was actually the new-incarnation of Makras?

The only person who could actually know if this was true was Makras. Anyone else would always live with the doubt that Makras' technicians had simply managed to produce a piece of software that did a very good job of 'appearing to be' Makras. So who was to say, anyway? Surely a clever piece of software could trick anyone. Anyone willing to believe. And as long as the P.R.O.P.H.E.T and the 'puppet' Emperor delivered peace, prosperity, happiness, and the optimal life experience possible for all the people in the galaxy, did it really matter if Makras had achieved robo-transmigration or not?

And so it was that O.P. humbly got up and, thanking everyone, and expressing his apologies that he had taken up so much of their time, left the room to go back to his private chambers to pack for his return to the outside world. However when he got to the door of his room he found Destin waiting expectantly. A huge grin on his face. O.P. had never seen Destin smiling like that. In a few moments he was to find out why. And the rest, is, well, not just this story, or even his story, but history.

Chapter Thirty Seven: Destin rises to the occasion

Before O.P.'s ascension to the position of Imperial Emperor in waiting, Makrus the 54th, the current Emperor issued a decree formally appointing Commander Destin Psycho-Historian in Chief. This automatically meant a promotion to General, of the Imperial Guard. This was a high honor. Even Destin could not help but express his great pleasure. It was more than he had ever aspired to.

This came as no surprise to the existing appointees. For P.R.O.P.H.E.T, I mean, The Emperor, had consulted them over the appointment in depth, before finally making his decree. As a good Emperor, he had the final say, and responsibility, but would rarely make a decision that contradicted his most respected advisors. But the current sitting Psycho-historian in Chief, General Thacken, had been extremely pleased when first asked for his opinion of Destin. For he had every confidence in Destin's abilities. And Thacken was quite ready for retirement. He had served his Emperor loyally and conscientiously. But now that the Emperor was beginning his training of his successor, Thacken thought it only fitting that the new Emperor-in-waiting's loyal friends should be given a rank befitting the mentor and guard of the future Emperor.

Thacken had discussed the matter deeply and at length, making sure that O.P. need have no doubts about the confidence that Thacken had in Destin. Thacken had expressed his great personal pleasure at the young Emperor-in-waiting should be blessed with such loyal and competent friends. The new young Emperor-in-waiting displayed, as far as Thacken could tell, all the traits that made Thacken love the current reigning Emperor with all his heart, as much as he respected him with his entire reason. At Destin's induction ceremony, Thacken warmly handed Destin the accouterments of his new rank, while proclaiming the official address 'Loyalty should be rewarded, and competence should be given the greatest power to do the greatest good', in keeping with the traditions of the ceremony.

Chapter Thirty Eight: O.P.'s induction ceremony

All the gang were together once more for the great day. Deacon and 'It's-a-cat' were given a special entourage. Destin and Pauline came as a couple, with her son Jamie.

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Destin was ablaze with pride in his elegantly stylish new Imperial General's uniform. He left Pauline and Jamie to join Renshaw, who was now with PRI, but would soon have to head off to head the honor guard that would flank O.P during the inauguration. He had already gone over every security detail with his patent attention to detail. He now relaxed and enjoyed the occasion. Fay was among the many dignitaries who were attending from around the galaxy. In all there were 39 planets represented by their heads of state. Many were fascinating characters in their own rights, and the news broadcasters were constantly zooming in on the various planetary potentates and excitedly giving viewers run-downs on their planets, and gossip surrounding them.

However one official guest had captured the public's interest more than any other. And this was only to be expected. For no-one could fail to be entranced by the beautiful Princess of Schoenen. She literally beamed like a supernova. The hot gossip was that the Princess of Schoenen and the Emperor-in-waiting had spent a great deal of time together. More than strictly necessary for 'affairs of state'. Expectations were high that soon there might be another announcement. This one of much more interest to the average galactic citizen than the inauguration of a new 'Emperor-in-waiting'. The media could not resist speculations that relations between Eulin and Schoenen might soon attain a level of intimacy not seen since the early years of Optimisation. The public were delighted at the prospect.

The public broadcasters had been leaving most of their cameras to linger on the glorious person of Princess Fay when suddenly a commotion broke out among the security personnel. The cameras quickly focused in as billions of viewers around the galaxy held their breaths in anticipation. What could have alarmed the security forces into action? Billions waited with baited breath. Even the news reporters spoke not a word. Every nerve was at heightened sensitivity, as all eyes tried to make out the source of the electrifying ripples in the now charged atmosphere.

Security had closed in around the visiting guests. Large screens had shot up at intervals, to limit the effects of any blasts or biological agents. People were being taken out by emergency exits that had appeared in the walls, floors, and ceilings of the huge Imperial Hall.

O.P had looked on in alarm on the holo-vision in his chambers as he was preparing for the ceremony. No-one could stop him as he suddenly leaped up from his chair and ran for the Imperial Hall. He was followed by his team of personal bodyguards, as he entered the hall in full flight. He took a quick look around, found the Princess Fay being lead by her security detail through an exit, and took off with a lunge.

The reporting media could not help but be caught up in his rush. All cameras followed him as he fled after the princess.

Just as he caught up with her entourage all the security lights turned from orange to green. The protective shields fell back silently into place. Speakers calmly announced that there was no threat.

The cameras caught the look that passed between the Princess Fay and O.P, and followed their gaze back towards the original source of the commotion.

And so the whole galaxy watched as Renshaw leaned down to pick up what appeared to be some sort of furry animal, and Deacon rushed to him, a look of great relief on his face, which slowly made way for a look of great embarrassment, as he realised that 'It's-a-cat' was fine, but that they were now the center of attention.

Renshaw waved to O.P, who returned his wave, gave Fay a marvelously romantic look, and, taking his leave of her with a gracious smile and bow, he headed across to his old friends. Of course the cameras were following his every move. And back in the news

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rooms researchers were doing their job, trying to 'feed' their reporters with as much background detail on the 'exotic animal' and it's 'handler' as they could get.

'Oh It's-a-cat', O.P purred as he took the slightly startled, but always composed and regal 'It's-a-cat' from Deacon and gave him a rub, as It's-a-cat purred ecstatically. Just then Destin broke in among the group. He had just got out of the quick security de-brief, ensured that no other threats existed which might take advantage of the current excitement, and, leaving the situation in hands he had every confidence in, hurried off to join his friends.

It's-a-cat gave Destin a purr of recognition and then lost itself in the generous caresses that all the gang lavished on it. There was laughter and hand-shaking, and pats on the back and hugs all around. It was a moment all would remember for the rest of their lives. A moment of peace, harmony, and safety. They all enjoyed each other's company as if the rest of the galaxy did not exist. But then of course the rest of the galaxy made its existence known in the form of several Imperial aides who graciously reminded O.P and the gang that the galaxy was waiting to induct its newest Emperor-in-waiting. And so, beaming with that glow that only re-acquaintances with old, trusted, beloved friends can lend to a face, the group disbanded and returned to their places in the tightly choreographed ceremony.

The media were abuzz across the galaxy, speculating on the relationships between this group of people who were clearly the greatest of friends. What adventures had they shared that had brought them so close together? Researchers were busy seeking answers to the many questions this little get-together had raised as the cameras returned back to the final preparations for the induction ceremony.

The ceremony went smoothly. The reigning Emperor appeared in splendidly regal simplicity, as he handed over the ceremonial devices. O.P felt the weight of the Imperial device in his hands as the Emperor humbly offered it to him. He kneeled before the Emperor and felt the weight of responsibility fall down upon him. But he also felt an upwelling of joy and pride at the great honor being bestowed upon him. He promised himself that he would be true to the spirit of Makras. He then turned to face the galaxy. He turned his gaze out across the audience, being sure to make each visitor feel that he had personally noticed them. But he could not stop his gaze lingering upon the Princess Fay. Then suddenly, realising he had been staring for much too long at her, he consciously turned his gaze upon the Hall and its dignitaries and guests.

O.P quickly caught the eye of Renshaw, Destin, and Deacon, offering them a warm smile and wave, before continuing with his official duties, making sure everyone felt that he was there for them.

Chapter Thirty Nine: Forgiveness and thanks

In his first official duty as 'Emperor-in-waiting', O.P had been invited to Schoenen to preside over the planet's official 'day of forgiveness and thanks'. This was an old Schoenen tradition. People would be encouraged to forgive each for their mistakes, and to give thanks for their friends and good fortune over the previous year.

Fay proved very popular in Eulin, and throughout the entire galaxy. The media had gone into a bit of a frenzy over the unusually 'romantic' story of the new Emperor, and the Schoenen Princess. It was the sort of 'fairytale' story that appealed to a lot of people. For while A.O had taken much of the illusion and 'noble lies' of romance away from sexual relationships, there were still many people who enjoyed the 'fantasy role play of eternal romantic love', just as there were many who enjoyed the 'fantasy role play' of

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old fashioned religions. Under the A.O Eden Protocols such fantasy role play was enjoyed for what it was. Fiction. Lies. Self-deception. Role playing. Fantasy.

People were free to indulge in such fantasies, while they had no legally binding value. They were just games. Fantasy. Anyone was free to believe fairies, elves, and gnomes lived in the forests. Anyone was free to engage in elaborate rites and rituals. It was considered a form of harmless masturbation. It gave its practitioners pleasure. There was no way that they could do any harm. For the fantasy role plays had no political value. There could never be any compulsion on anyone to participate.

Everyone tolerated everyone else's pet fantasy role plays. There was no malice. You could dress as you pleased. You could masturbate to your hearts content, imagining angels were watching over you, or that the electro-chemical imbalances experienced as romantic crushes and romantic love would last forever, or that you were really a powerful magician who ruled other dimensions, while in this one you were a book-keeper.

The fantasies were treated like any other sort of intoxicant. As long as your 'use' did not interfere with your 'role' in society, it was fine. You were free to indulge in the appropriate contexts. There were loads of 'resorts' where you could live out your fantasy to your hearts content. You could have huge wedding ceremonies, where you indulged in the intoxicating feelings of eternal love. You could practice all forms of religious ceremonies, to all sorts of gods, bathing in the masturbatory pleasure of being a 'chosen' one, with a special connection to any sort of gods that appealed to you.

And so there were billions of people who had followed the 'romantic story' of 'O.P and the Princess' from the time of O.P's return to Eulin, on the official Schoenen Diplomatic cruiser, with full Imperial escort. The handsome young O.P, returned from having barely escaped an assassination attempt on some barely civilised planet out in the far reaches of the Galaxy, only to find himself once more the target of a vicious plot, and once more escaping by the finest of margins (for renegade Engodith assassins had reached arrived at the space port only moments after the Schoenen craft had launched), to fall into the protection, and the arms, so they liked to think, of a beautiful Schoenen princess.

PRI had welcomed the news of the 'romance' almost as much as Renshaw had. She was glad that O.P had finally found a girl who actually 'liked that sort of thing', as she had put it to Renshaw. At this Renshaw felt a little bolt of disappointment. But it quickly evaporated. He liked to occasionally enjoy the fantasy role play, the one where he and PRI had a huge wedding, and lived together for the rest of their lives, but for him it was that. A fantasy. He was well aware, from having witnessed the consequences of 'marriage' and 'romance' on earth, of the costs of indulging too much in such fantasies. They were beautiful. But you managed to get the best out of them by accepting that they were just beautiful fairy-tales. Lovely fantasies. And as long as you avoided becoming 'addicted' to them, you could avoid all their negative effects.

For Renshaw, like many others on Eulin, and across the Imperium, the ideal was to enjoy, for a few weeks, the idea of eternal love. You and your lover would 'role play' eternal love for a few weeks. It was pure bliss. And then you would return to the real world, and other lovers, to cleanse yourself of the attachment to the fantasy, to ensure that it never got control of you, and your better judgement.

This was one of the first 'Optimalisations' that Makrus the Optimiser had introduced. It had gained quicker acceptance from the male side of the population at first, as it was the males that tended to pay for the fantasy of the women. It was the women who found the greatest selfish pleasure in reproducing themselves. As part of the 'optimalisations', the women had lost two 'benefits' that the B.O society had provided. It had legitimated their selfish craving to have babies. It had legitimated their expectations that men 'pay for sex', one way or another. Women had been among the beneficiaries

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of the 'slave' society. It was one reason that the 'slave society' had survived so long. For at least half the population felt that it was in their interests to maintain it.

It was an example of an optimisation that never would have occurred under democracy. Even though the interests of the not-yet-born-persons were clearly best served by managed reproduction, and a societal resourcing of the needs of children, few women would have 'voted' for it. For people are selfish by nature. They think of their own pleasures, pains, and reliefs. This is the locus and extent of virtually all their so-called 'reasoning' and 'argument'. There are very few people indeed for whom 'reasoning' is little more than a calculation of personal pleasure, pain and relief. Few people were capable of seeing past their own immediate desires, to consider even their own interests over an eternity of random new-births.

And so it was by force that the institution of 'the family' was replaced by more optimal sets of relationships. Makras had nothing against the 'idea' of eternal love, as a fantasy role play. There was a place for fantasy role play. But he was not going to let the satisfaction of some fantasy role play ruin the lives of countless generations.

Even PRI didn't mind indulging in the occasional 'romantic' fantasy, as long as it was clear that that was all it was. A role play. A game. She didn't like the idea of hurting anyone, and if she felt that someone was getting in above their heads, she felt uncomfortable and would retreat. And so Renshaw was very careful about how he dealt with his 'romantic' feelings for PRI. At the same time PRI, well aware of the mores of Earth, and Renshaw's early experiences on that planet, made exceptions for him. For she really 'liked' him. She found him quite interesting and a lot of fun. And, after all, he had grown into an extremely handsome young man. He was taller and stronger than most of the Imperial cadets he trained with. He was the trusted companion of the Emperor Makrus himself. He had every sort of attraction a young woman could want in a young man.

So when Makras announced that Fay would be his first consort, a sort of ceremonial position, he made a lot of 'romantically inclined fantasy role players' very happy. The 'first consort' was the A.O equivalent of a sort of wife. It was intended to ensure that the Emperor had some constant source of emotional support. The kind you could only get in a physically intimate relationship. It helped ensure emotional stability and gave the Emperor someone to turn to when he needed someone to 'lean on'.

Of course he had Renshaw. And he 'loved' Renshaw as much as anyone could love another person. But his connection with Fay had that 'magical' quality that the poets had once related to that ancient notion of 'souls'. Of two people who had once been one, but had somehow been separated, and had been searching for each other over the ages, before finally being united once more. They had called such lovers 'soul mates'. It was as if Fay and O.P had found, in each other, their 'soul mates'.

The psycho-historians were quite taken by the whole thing. For they knew things that would have shocked even the most speculative of people. The connection between Schoenen and Makrus the Optimiser was closer than any official history had ever hinted at. Few were aware of that connection. Of course many marveled at the 'convergences' between Makras' 'Eden Protocols' and the 'Atenic philosophy of Ma'at'. Some even suggesting that somehow Atenic teachers or teaching materials had somehow found their way to Eulin. But none had ever come close to guessing at the real connections. And so the psycho-historians, with Destin as their Chief, were extremely pleased when O.P, now Emperor, announced the Imperial edict.

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Chapter Forty: Release of the official 'test' transcripts

Of course as part of the selection process, official transcripts were released to the public, showing the responses of the candidates to many of the verbal questions given to them. These are of course made public, in the hope of educating people, and giving them insights into the character of their Emperor-in-waiting. Transcripts for all Emperors go back many thousands of years. Of course for this reason it would be easy for anyone to 'memorise' the answers of past successful candidates. So this part of the testing is more of a formality. The key parts of the testing are confidential. Citizens can only guess at how their favorite candidates 'behaved' during the 'virtual reality' experiences.

The official 'test' transcripts

Here are the official transcripts of some of the questions the candidates were faced with. If you like, test yourself. Do you have what it takes to be Galactic Emperor in this life, or perhaps one of your *next-lives*?

Selection panel: what is 'The Optimal Ethic Generator'?

O.P: Makras had been very impressed with the 'ethics technology' developed by the philosopher John Rawls, which Rawls called 'Veil of ignorance'. Rawls argued that if people could not know who they were, and how they might gain or lose as a result of a decision, then they would be motivated to make a decision that was the optimal one for everyone who could or might stand to benefit or lose as a result of that decision. Makras first extended the definition to include all sentient beings. And so while making decisions that affected all sentient beings, such as farm animals, the decision makers would never be able to know if they were in fact humans or chickens.

Makras then extended the concept of a 'Veil of Ignorance' into the future, to counter the problem with long term planning identified by the economist John Maynard Keynes that 'in the long run we are all dead'. Makras ultimately reduced his own ethics technology to the question, which he called 'The Optimal Ethics Generator'. 'If you knew for sure that you would be randomly and eternally new-born as any sentient creature in the Universe, then what would you do?' He meant for people to apply that question to every decision they had to make. It would of course force people to empathise with the pleasure, pain, and relief that their decisions might inflict on other people and animals. They would then ask themselves if the benefits i.e. pleasure and relief that the decision produced for its target beneficiaries, would be justified by the pain / suffering / costs / losses the decision would produce for the non-beneficiaries of that decision. The process would force them to seriously look into the costs and benefits that would arise from any decision for all those who stood to pay / lose or benefit as a result of any a decision. This was Makras' response to 'externalities', costs imposed by a decision on people and animals who had no power to influence those decisions.

Makras wanted to realise a 'veil of ignorance' as a technological device. This is why so much of his team's earlier work was on virtual reality experience systems. He considered the notion of random eternal new-births to be the optimal potential dogma. He had considered basing a religion around the notion as a 'noble lie', but then accepted that all religions will be corrupted by TROONATNOOR. And so he decided against founding a new religion based on his 'Optimal Ethics Generator', and returned to finding technological solutions that could by-pass the worst in human nature.

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As far as we know, Makras appears to have been convinced that random eternal new-lives was the most likely possibility among the possibilities humans had considered. He was in fact motivated by his fear that he would have to come back to his planet as any sentient creature on it. The idea horrified him. He could not bear to think of being 'imprisoned' in the average 'human' experience engine. And the idea of enduring many lives as a 'factory' farmed animal were of course terrifying. This was one of his great motivations. He had admitted on many occasions in his personal writings and to friends that he would much rather not have to endure being himself any longer. He was always the greatest advocate for euthanasia. He had reported many times that he would not have endured the suffering that his life represented to him, if not for the fear that if he didn't optimise the universe this life, he might be forced to endure countless new-lives in the universe as it was right now. And that thought was unbearable to him.

Selection panel: This leads naturally into the next Question. Why did Makras institute P.R.O.P.H.E.T?

O.P: Makras' experiences with human nature taught him that any vision of an optimal future for humanity could not be based on a system that relied on humans, and was thus vulnerable to all the weaknesses and faults of human nature. What was best in human nature was expressed in a rare few individuals. These individuals usually suffered victimisation and persecution for their ethical superiority. They had no chance of gaining positions of influence and power. Makras had experienced this himself at every level of his private and work-life. He had at first sought to find the blame for his problems with people within himself, but had to accept that it was TROONATNOOR, and not some personal fault which he could simply remedy by becoming a better person. He once commented that to succeed in this life, he would have had to become a worse person.

So Makras spent many decades analysing the ethical and material problems of society. He worked out the basic principles of his Eden Protocols. He worked out how they could be operationalised in practice. At first he sought out other people to work with, as a political enterprise. But he could find no people willing to join his nascent political party.

After giving up all hope, he one day had an inspiring idea. He began work on designing automated systems that could implement his Eden Protocols. In his words his aim was that the worst in human nature should be prevented from ruining the best. The systems were of course hated by all those people who benefited from injustice, waste, and corruption. The legal profession. The rich and privileged. And in fact most of the general public, who were incapable of understanding Makras' ideas. Of those who were capable of comprehending TROONATNOOR, few shared his good-willed intentions. His good nature. His desire to eliminate the slavery that he recognised that even he himself was a beneficiary of.

At the time software and computing had just begun their most spectacular leaps of technological progress. He turned away from his earlier attempts to work with humans for positive change, and focused on working for humans and all other sentient beings, through the means of technology. His work with Kim Jestem, and a small team of highly capable and ethical computer specialists culminated in the first holistic software program which would later become **P.R.O.P.H.E.T.** (Protocolled Realisation Of Potential Holistic Enlightenment Transfer). The **P.R.O.P.H.E.T** system was first intended as an advisor. And most people in the galaxy still consider that its function is limited to advising the current Emperor and his human advisors.

However a closer inspection will reveal that P.R.O.P.H.E.T has more or less taken over all decision making processes. P.R.O.P.H.E.T practically determines all legal judgments.

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P.R.O.P.H.E.T effectively rules the Galaxy. The Emperor does have the legal right to over-ride P.R.O.P.H.E.T, but to my knowledge this right has never been acted on. No emperor has seen fit to challenge P.R.O.P.H.E.T's judgment. P.R.O.P.H.E.T has micro-managed our society since Optimisation. Makras stated that the Optimisations would never have been possible without P.R.O.P.H.E.T. And there was of course a cult of speculation based around stories that Makras had been trying to achieve 'robo-transmigration', in an attempt to become 'the ghost in the machine' that was P.R.O.P.H.E.T.

Makras wanted to ensure that if he was forced to have to endure a 'new-life', that the experience engine he inherited would be the best experience engine possible given TROONATNOOR. The optimal life experience that an optimal society could offer to every participant. To every sentient creature that lived in it. To every man, woman, boy, girl, and animal. And the only way he could ensure this was by leaving the task of optimisation in the hands of an 'Optimal Experience Engine / holistic inheritance Generator'. A computer program that would micro-manage society, and every part of our lives, like a good-willed, good-natured, holistically enlightened, competent, god-like entity. That entity was to be P.R.O.P.H.E.T. It would be P.R.O.P.H.E.T that would implement his Eden Protocols.

Makras realised that love was simply reflexive of pleasure and relief. Makras found that all motivations can be reduced to a desire for pleasure, and a desire for the relief of pain. Negatively put, we love things that we associate with our own pleasure and relief. We hope for pleasure and relief. We fear pain, and the loss of a pleasure. Romantic love is one form of pleasure and relief. We want things that bring pleasure. We 'need' things that bring relief. We need others to alleviate the displeasure of loneliness. We want others, when we imagine that having them will give us pleasure.

As our situations change, so does our relationship to a person. At one moment they may represent relief, at another pleasure, and at another an obstacle to pleasure or relief. And so Makras found that the ideal of eternal romantic love was sub-optimal. In its place he desired a 'fantasy role play' of eternal love, in which partners pretended their love was forever, while having put plans in place for when it ultimately fell apart. In other words permanent relationships were not expected or planned for. This would allow people to enjoy the benefits of romantic love, while reducing its obviously foreseeable costs.

Makras himself felt that the benefits that most lives offered, that most holistic inheritances could provide, that most experience engines provided, were far outweighed by the costs they imposed, demanded, extracted, and forced the 'experiencer' to endure. He himself was inclined to the 'nirvana' of the Buddhist philosophy. And so he was ambivalent about pleasure. For Makras the promise of pleasure was like a trick to force people to endure their lives. He felt that few of the promises for pleasure that life appeared to offer were ever realised. Like the fabled Buddha, he often considered pleasure to be the 'snare' that led to sentience becoming imprisoned in bodies. However unlike the fabled Buddha, he was not quite ready to reject life per se.

Makras had often worried allowed that perhaps 'not-life' was so boring that sentience sought out life forms as 'experience engines' to alleviate that boredom.

Makras was ambivalent about his own vision. On the one hand it might be 'tricking' him into enduring his life. On the other, it might offer a real solution to the problems of life. It might offer optimal experience engines that could offer pleasure and relief from the boredom of 'eternal being', without most of the pain, suffering, misery, exploitation, slavery, and cruelty that the world as he knew it demanded as the 'entry price'.

The current cost-benefit analysis of his times favored mass euthanasia. For very few enjoyed lives worth living. The rest appeared to be necessary merely to ensuring that

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the few did enjoy such lives. It was a slave society that Makras was born into. The history of the galaxy was one of slavery. His ambition was to eliminate slavery. All forms of slavery. He hoped it would be possible to make every life worth living. He was not confident. And so his first priority had been to make euthanasia universally accessible to everyone who had decided that their life was not worth living for them.

Selection panel: You have just mentioned euthanasia in the context of slavery. Please explain.

O.P: Makras saw that most people and animals were being kept in slavery by a small beneficiary class that used the masses, and animals, as nothing more than means to their own ends. At first they were legally slaves. However even when they were legally freed, they were still treated as mere means to the beneficiaries' ends. They produced all the goods and services that made the lives of the beneficiary classes so pleasurable. This is why every religion defined suicide, and non-reproductive forms of sex as a sin, and a crime. For if people killed themselves, and stopped reproducing themselves, then the beneficiaries would have to produce all the goods and services they consumed themselves. And so their pleasures would be reduced to those things that they could produce by their own effort, risk, and sacrifice. They would have no masses to exploit. They would have no cheap labor. No tax payers. No soldiers. No servants. No cleaners. No builders. They would have no slaves. Makras defined a slave as someone or something another person or thing treated merely as a means to their own ends. In other words the interests of the slave were not considered in the decisions of the beneficiary classes. The slave's pleasure and relief did not enter into the cost-benefit calculations of the beneficiary classes.

The beneficiary classes instituted religions and all sorts of superstitions which threatened anyone who attempted suicide, or simply satisfied their sexual desires in ways that did not make babies, with 'fates worse than death'. These were cruel 'punishments' for those who had attempted suicide, or engaged in oral sex, anal sex, or masturbation, and often also punished their families. These 'religions' also threatened to punish anyone who escaped punishment in this life, with eternities of torture in various forms of 'hell', and next-lives. These were the deterrents that the beneficiary classes used to coerce people into living lives that were not worth living. This ensured that the beneficiary classes kept, and multiplied, the means to produce their own lives of pleasure and ease. Each child was a new slave. A new means of production. A new producer of the pleasurable goods and services that the beneficiary classes, along with their 'priest class' allies, enjoyed.

Selection panel: What was Makras' relationship with democracy?

O.P: He realised fairly early in life that few people thought much further than their own pleasures, pains, and reliefs. When they spoke of justice and equality, it was not in the same way as he did. For them justice meant justice for themselves. They might extend this self-interest to a few other people on whom their own happiness depended, but it rarely extended far. For them equality merely meant that no-one should have more than them. And so he joked that everyone was for inheritance taxes, only they would all set the threshold just a little above what they expected to inherit. He was saddened to find that so few people really cared about anyone except themselves. This meant that all politics was little more than lobbying among narrow self interest groups. It had no idealistic content. He noted that most of the best laws had been imposed on the

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majority by a minority, through representative democracy. The public resented most rational impositions upon their freedoms. They only reluctantly comply with most laws. The laws however, get people to act 'as if' they cared about each other, as if they had respect for each other's rights, and as if they were rational. One of his earliest philosophical essays was titled 'Why the majority are usually wrong'.

Selection panel: We still have public groups calling for a renewal of the Before Optimalisation right of individuals to reproduce themselves. How would you answer them, as Emperor?

O.P: Not-yet-born-persons have legal rights. Existing persons do not, as individuals, have the legal right to force their own holistic inheritance upon not-yet-born-persons. P.R.O.P.H.E.T has strict criteria which we all accept as optimal. Children are guaranteed an equal holistic inheritance, as far as P.R.O.P.H.E.T and we can produce this. Each child has access to the same resources. Each child is ensured the optimal genetic inheritance P.R.O.P.H.E.T and we can offer it. This is the basis of the social and economic equality that people across the galaxy have enjoyed since the first few hundred years after Makras introduced his optimalisations.

Selection panel: What is the connection between reproductive responsibility and 'free will'?

O.P: We of course find it hard to believe that people could have been so mistaken about free will before Makras' educational reforms. Before Optimalisation, people confused the freedom to act upon their will, with free will. People experienced pride and shame for their actions, and were punished and rewarded, as if each person could simply chose their own actions. The slave society concept of 'sin' contributed to this misconception. The legal system 'punished' people for their actions. The rich and successful congratulated themselves, and felt a sense of entitlement to enjoy luxuries and privileges they defined themselves as having 'earned' simply as a function of having been born smarter, more attractive, to richer parents, and with access to a better education. By the same token the poor, exploited 'slaves' were taught to feel that they had gotten what they deserved as well. In this way the notion of free will was used to 'legitimate' extreme inequality, which the beneficiary classes then gladly allowed the masses to reproduce.

When a couple took reproduction in its own hands, it forced its own holistic inheritance upon its own children, as not-yet-born-persons. And so the slaves reproduced more slaves for the beneficiary classes. They taught their own children the lie that they could 'be whatever they wanted to be', if only they worked hard enough. In reality of course socio-economic position was determined by luck multiplied by effort multiplied by sacrifice multiplied by risk. Luck of holistic inheritance played the massively greater role. Lucky people inherited a 'luck factor' of 100. Most people inherited their parents' luck factor of 1. In other words most people were doomed to reproduce their parents' socio-economic position, no matter how much effort, sacrifice, and risk they invested.

Today P.R.O.P.H.E.T, and our society, ensure that each not-yet-born-person has an optimal inheritance. This means that in our own next-lives we are likely to inherit an optimal holistic inheritance. There will never again be a pool of inequality which a minority of excessively fortunate individuals can exploit to their own narrow advantage.

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Most people would also find it hard to believe that in the Before Optimalisation days, billions of not-yet-born-persons were actually killed while they were still in their mother's wombs, because they were unwanted. Today each child is guaranteed that it have carers and a society that treasures it. Each not-yet-born-person and has already been allocated all the resources it will require to have the optimal chances of a satisfying, productive, happy life.

Kim Jestem, the philosopher, had demonstrated how it would be impossible for any two actors to interact in the same game, if either has free will. What we call our 'self' is an experience engine that makes experience possible. However it also had, up until the optimalisations, a tendency to produce negative experiences more often than positive ones. Electrons flow from negative to positive. The wind blows from high pressure to low pressure systems. Larger masses attract smaller masses. Magnetic poles attract and repel each other.

We are attracted to beauty, and repelled by ugliness. We seek pleasure and relief, and do our best to avoid and relieve pain. Our own pleasure and relief motivates all our actions. It appears that our eternal new-birth is driven by a desire for pleasure. A desire for positive experience. The optimalisations ensured that our current and future lives can be satisfying, rewarding, positive, enjoyable, and pleasurable, by ensuring each not-yet-born-person the optimal holistic inheritance that we, as a society, could offer it. By ensuring each not-yet-born-person such an optimal holistic inheritance, we ensure that our own next-lives will be positive experiences. And so the rational person sacrifices the right to make reproductive decisions in return for an optimal society and optimal holistic inheritance.

It was necessary to impose some of these optimalisations upon the masses, as many of our human impulses are contradictory, and if left unmanaged, will produce lives defined by negative experiences for the majority. In the past the minority beneficiary classes deliberately constructed and institutionalised social norms and attitudes that benefited themselves, without regard to the costs imposed on other sentient life forms, and other people. The optimalisations were opposed mostly by these powerful groups, who selfishly wished to maintain the status quo in their own narrow interests. Reproduction was just one area where the selfish interests of the masses corresponded to the selfish interests of the beneficiary classes. Makras was the first person in history to break the vicious cycle of the reproduction of inequality, and the reproduction of sub-optimal experience engines and holistic inheritances. Since Optimalisation, only the best of everything has been deliberately reproduced. It is the institutions of Optimalisation that we have to thank for the positive life experiences we enjoy today, and can count on enjoying in our next-lives.

Selection panel: What is the role of Euthanasia in the Optimalisations?

O.P: It has not yet been possible to control genetics and to make eugenics work 100% reliably. There is the problem of embryology, and random events that science still cannot control. This is one reason why some people may still be born with a sub-optimal genetic inheritance. Accidents occur, and people are badly injured in ways that we cannot correct for. Also some illnesses, and old age in general, cannot be cured by our current technologies. For such reasons some people find that their holistic inheritances are unable to provide them with a positive life experience, no matter how hard they try. In these cases it would be insane to force them to endure their lives. It makes perfect sense for them to leave their current experience engine and go onto their next life a little earlier than they would have in the 'natural' course of events.

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We may selfishly wish our friends and other loved ones to remain among us, however we must resist our impulse to treat other sentient beings as means to our own ends. That is slavery. And slavery was abolished finally and completely with the introduction of the Optimalisations. And so we respect and celebrate our beloved friends and families decisions to proceed to their next-lives, and offer every support to ensuring that the process is as dignified, and comfortable for them as we can make it. We are sad to lose a loved one, but happy that that loved one has thrown off the negative experiences they had been forced to endure as part of their current holistic inheritance, and has gone onto a better next-life. We look forward to sharing their company again, in future lives.

**This is the end of the first of the ‘Clones of Makras’ novels
Stay tuned for more prequels and sequels**

